

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS A RESOURCE FOR COLLEGE CHAPLAINCY:
PERSONAL AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION
WITHIN A MULTICULTURAL CONTEXT

A Professional Project
Presented to
the Faculty of the
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of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry

by
Ashli Cartwright-Peak
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This professional project, completed by

Ashli Cartwright-Peak,

*has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty
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fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of*

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

Faculty Committee

Mary Elizabeth Moore

Constance R. Rogers

April 6, 1994
Date

Margaret L. L. L.
Dean

ABSTRACT

Autobiography as a Resource for College Chaplaincy:

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within a Multicultural Context

by

Ashli Cartwright-Peak

The cultural and religious landscape on the college campus in the United States today reflects a pluralistic society that is dealing with problems brought on by ever-increasing demographic changes. As the college chaplain undertakes the challenge to minister on the campus in the midst of a growing multireligious and multicultural student population, she or he would be well-advised to utilize autobiography as a resource for assisting the campus community as they live with, reflect on, and make difficult but needed changes in their lives and in their world. As is inherent in the method proposed for the use of autobiography with students, this project demonstrates that autobiography can serve as a way station between boundary lines drawn over issues of "difference" or "other-ness." The importance of connecting personal narrative and reflection with theological reflection is modelled throughout the length of the project as a way of illustrating and authenticating the relevant, meaningful application of autobiography on the campus.

Chapter 1 sets the stage for the chapters to follow. It addresses and elaborates on the problem, clarifies the

thesis, defines the role of the chaplain, and selectively reviews previous literature on chaplaincy, autobiography, theology and story, and multiculturalism.

Chapter 2 exemplifies the autobiographical method I propose and introduces the reader to paradigmatic events central to my story.

Chapter 3 reflects on meaningful ways my story connected with others' stories through ordinary events in my life, and more specifically, through the medium of film.

Chapter 4 guides the reader through my story via reflection on different developmental periods and influential experiences in my life as they relate to the central story of my faith community.

Chapter 5 locates my story in the context of a theological world filled with a polyphony of stories, each bidding for recognition and acknowledgment.

Chapter 6 describes the value of autobiography in the multireligious and multicultural world of the college campus and elucidates how my "autotheographical" method can be adapted as a resource for ministry.

Chapter 7 envisions the college chaplain in the role of autotheographer, utilizing the example of a case study, and giving attention to the chaplain as storyteller, storyshaper, and storyweaver.

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Were it not for such persons as my husband Ira, my daughter Sydney, my mother Stella, my sister Ali, my friend Beverly, my professors Mary Elizabeth and Kathy, and clouds of witnesses in my past and present, I would not have arrived at this place or this hour of completion of my project or been able to fulfill the requirements for my D.Min. degree. These persons have been my nurturers, my teachers, and a significant part of my human community, helping me to continue to dream dreams and see visions of better tomorrows. Because of them and countless others, I believe gratitude to be a reciprocal venture of give and receive, receive and give. Therefore, in gratitude to those who have given to me, I express my deep thanks and promise to take what has been given so richly and unconditionally and pass it on in various ways to others who need it.

Ashli Cartwright-Peak

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PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The Problem Addressed

The problem addressed by this project is the need for the college or university chaplain to utilize autobiography as a resource for ministry because it can transcend the lines of race, class, gender, ethnicity, culture, and religion on the ever-changing, increasingly diverse, multicultural campus.

Definitions of Key Terms

In order to facilitate the reader's understanding of that which is addressed in this study, I have purposefully placed my definition of key terms here at the beginning of this chapter.

College/University

Though the setting, my experience, and the content herein are primarily focused on the liberal arts college, this dissertation is intended to be inclusive of the university campus as well. However, because a continued repetition of the words college and university is unnecessary, from this point on I will use almost exclusively the word *college* when it refers to any institution of higher education.

Chaplain

It is important to clarify, first of all, that there are some general differences between the position of

chaplain on the college campus and that of campus minister. Typically, the title campus minister is given to a minister, a rabbi, or a priest who may or may not be ordained, may be a lay person, a volunteer, a seminarian who is fulfilling internship requirements for a degree program, or a person hired to serve in an adjunct position.¹ She or he may be "officially employed, appointed, or called by a congregation, ministerium, association, or council outside the institution," yet work directly within a college or university, usually as a member of a team, and "charged specifically with ministerial functions for a sub-population of the institution."² Additionally, the campus minister's responsibilities are limited to a smaller segment of the campus population which is different from the chaplain's responsibilities to serve the entire campus community.

The work of the chaplain is to be understood both descriptively and normatively. In the descriptive sense, the chaplain is:

1. A person designated by the term "chaplain" or some closely allied title;³
2. A person who performs in some combination several of the functions generally associated with the chaplaincy, such as leading worship, directing

¹ Barbara Brummett, The Spirited Campus: The Chaplain and the College Community (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1990), xx.

² Brummett, xiii.

³ The chaplain is usually, but not always, an ordained member of the clergy of a particular religious tradition.

or advising religious activities, counseling, teaching, and related activities;

3. A person who is appointed and/or approved by the college administration and responsible to it for campus religious work;

4. A person who is paid wholly or in large part by the college or university.⁴

In addition, from a normative perspective, Barbara Brummett defines the role of the college chaplain by his or her major functions in that role. She says that each function is independently important as it expands or contracts according to community needs at a given time. At the same time each is interdependently connected with the other as they are needed for a well-rounded chaplaincy program. The four major functions are:

(1) the pastoral function, in which the chaplain's role is one of conspicuous presence to the end that he/she cares, counsels, and fosters fellowship on the campus;

(2) the priestly function, in which the chaplain plans and leads in community worship, participates in ceremonial events, and speaks theologically about relevant community concerns;

(3) the rabbinical function, in which the chaplain teaches (formally or informally) and develops opportunities for dialogue and communication on appropriate topics; and

(4) the prophetic function, in which the chaplain encourages service through action for others, fosters a spirit of community, and provides opportunities for the development of ethical/moral sensitivity and concern for social justice.⁵

⁴ Seymour A. Smith, The American College Chaplaincy (New York: Association Press, 1954), 7.

⁵ Brummett, xx.

Autobiography

Autobiography is traditionally understood to be a literary genre wherein an individual either writes or dictates to another person the story of his or her own life. However, on the college campus, autobiography can play an important role in the chaplain's ministry. Within the chapters that follow, I hope to be persuasive in two ways. One way is to show that autobiography--the telling of one's own story--is crucial to the individual's religious growth and development and to the ongoing, meaningful, effective ministry of the chaplain. The other way is to persuade the chaplain to invite students to develop and articulate their individual stories and to begin a process of sharing and reflecting on their stories theologically.

Autotheography

I have coined the word autotheography to represent the interactive, interweaving process that takes place over time when autobiography and theology work together in the context of an emerging community. This community must recognize that the telling, shaping, and weaving of stories is integral to its life as a community-in-the-making. At the same time, when theological meaning is brought to bear on the stories within the community, then the community's story begins to take shape. When this happens, there is greater opportunity for the community to become autotheographical. Moreover, it is within the context of the autotheographical

community that the chaplain is called to minister and to bring forth the ultimate connections of the community and the earth and its inhabitants to the Divine.

Diversity

While the rapidly changing demography of our nation--once characterized by a certain homogeneity⁶--has brought on changes in attitudes regarding its people and its identity, it has at the same time brought about an increase in isolation and alienation in community life.⁷ More specifically, these changes have affected people's attitudes toward and perceptions and treatment of its majority and various minority groups.

Conflicts and tensions have arisen, and will continue to escalate, regarding the competing ideologies of pluralism (diversity) and assimilation (homogeneity) as they are influenced by differences in people's values--values related to issues such as class, status, gender, identity, and power.⁸ Consequently, in a nation whose peoples value

⁶ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries many Americans affirmed the metaphoric image of the nation as a melting pot of people, whose differences, cultures, and races were melted into one assimilated, Americanized identity or whole.

⁷ E. Allen Richardson, Strangers in This Land: Pluralism and the Response to Diversity in the United States (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1988), 21.

⁸ See Richardson, especially pp. 116-18 on the triple melting pot of first, second, and third generation immigrants, pp. 157-62 on the values of unity and diversity in Christian ecumenism and interfaith dialogue, and pp. 164-70 on conflict, prejudice, and discrimination.

competing ideologies, those in dominant groups and in minority groups have found themselves faced with the ambiguous and overwhelming, but significant, challenges brought on by the changing boundaries of identity, forms of expression, and distribution of power in a pluralistic society.⁹

Importantly then, Richardson claims, "[I]n pluralistic societies, the ability to understand diversity is related to the degree that it can be directly experienced."¹⁰ He gives the example of the Christian who, in order to understand what it is to be a Jew, must have a personal, intimate experience of encountering the Jew's tradition, internalizing her or his personal faith journey, and appreciating the role that her or his religion has played in times of suffering. Understanding a person and a religion crossculturally, says Richardson, will help reduce stereotypes based on culture or religion and will help interpret the meaning of suffering.¹¹

Another way to understand diversity in a pluralistic society, according to Richard Mouw and Sander Griffioen, is to adopt Franz von Baader's and George W. F. Hegel's "metaperspective" on pluralism--one that depicts "a horizon

⁹ Alaka Wali, "Multiculturalism: An Anthropological Perspective," Report from the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy, special issue, 12 (Spring/Summer 1992): 8.

¹⁰ Richardson, 200.

, ¹¹ Richardson, 200.

[emphasis mine] against which we can see the overall shape of a particular kind of plurality, so as better to understand its place in the scheme of things."¹² Mouw and Griffioen also commend Tom Driver's similar belief (to Baader's and Hegel's) that people should be encouraged to affirm a pluralism of perspectives, while at the same time pointing to a horizon against which it is possible to sort out and discern what "really" goes on at the level of diversity.¹³ In addition, Mouw and Griffioen affirm Driver's statement that the horizon is likely to lead us to discover previously-ignored voices, viewpoints, and experiences that have been systematically excluded.¹⁴ When these discoveries are made, then each deserves the right to be taken seriously.¹⁵

In recent years and even months, a barage of books and articles have flooded the market on such topics as cultural diversity, multiculturalism, ethnic identity, the shrinking of the white majority, and American identity. One of the articles that is relevant to this complex definition of diversity was written by two educators and researchers who are advocates of multicultural education in the United

¹² Richard Mouw and Sander Griffioen, Pluralisms and Horizons: An Essay in Christian Public Philosophy (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 7.

¹³ See Mouw and Griffioen, 10.

¹⁴ See Mouw and Griffioen, 9.

¹⁵ See Mouw and Griffioen, 9.

States. In their article, Christine Sleeter and Carl Grant reviewed, examined, and critiqued the existing literature on multicultural education.¹⁶

In giving a general definition of multicultural education from the body of literature they examined, they noted that the term means different things to different people. They also learned that the only common meaning of the term was that "it refers to changes in education that are supposed to benefit people of color."¹⁷ Expanding on that idea, in an article in The Wall Street Journal, Dennis Farney indicates that we are dealing with a redefinition of a new America-in-the-making as it moves toward a "minority majority" and transcends its divisions.¹⁸

Alice Kessler-Harris' and Sharon Bernstein's separate, but related articles, clarify further that the definition of what it means today to be an American needs to be redefined according to a person's understanding, meaning, and experience of identity.¹⁹ The new definition, therefore,

¹⁶ Christine E. Sleeter and Carl A. Grant, "An Analysis of Multicultural Education in the United States," Harvard Educational Review 57, no. 4 (1987): 421-44.

¹⁷ Sleeter and Grant, 436.

¹⁸ Dennis Farney, "Ethnic Identities Clash with Student Idealism at a California College," Wall Street Journal, 2 December 1992, western ed., A1.

¹⁹ Alice Kessler-Harris, "Multiculturalism Can Strengthen, Not Undermine a Common Culture," Chronicle of Higher Education, 21 October 1992, B3, B7; and Sharon Bernstein, "Multiculturalism: Building Bridges or Burning Them?," Los Angeles Times, 30 November 1992, A1, A16.

should be one that is fluid and susceptible to change, rather than one that is universal.²⁰ The two writers also emphasize the importance of acknowledging and appreciating difference, maintaining allegiance to one's own perspective, preserving one's group identity and respecting one's past, and giving a person a sense of connection to the larger society in which she or he lives.²¹

As has been implied above, the American experience has provided great, if not decisive, influence on giving definition to who we are as a culture,²² and who we are as groups formed on the basis of our similarities and our differences. Keeping this factor in mind, along with the recognition that the college campus is in many ways a microcosm or reflector of society, these same definitions

²⁰ Kessler-Harris, B3.

²¹ Kessler-Harris B3, B7; and Bernstein, A1, A16.

²² Judy Hammerschlag, "What Are We Teaching and Why?," paper written for an independent study in education at The Claremont Graduate School, Claremont, Calif., 12 May 1993. In Hammerschlag's paper, she reminds us "that culture is the choice of individuals and how they see themselves, and who they feel they are, [whereas], race/gender are not choices individuals can usually make. What happens in reality, however, is that race/culture are lumped together under the umbrella of ethnicity and treated as though they were one and the same. It seems as if it were decided that language, traditions, habits, and hopes can be determined by race and dictate how we relate to one another" (p. 3). She states further that we must recognize that "our society represents many races, nationalities, and cultures (of religion, sexual preference, gender, musical tastes, recreation, etc.) and they are all different" (p. 4). Hammerschlag concludes her argument with a caution against the universalizing of the word multicultural if we intend to be democratic in our approach to education.

related or implied above, also necessarily apply to the campus community. We must also keep in mind that, while it is impossible to place a "fixed meaning or precise, unchanging definition of America, it is possible to conceive democratic culture as a process in whose transformation we are all invited to participate."²³

Emancipatory Language

Since the inception of the women's movement in the 1960s in the United States, the use of inclusive language has been extended in significant ways to many of the domains of our society. Yet, today's language, in far too many cases, remains oppressive and exclusive of women and other minorities. In my writing I will follow Marjorie Procter-Smith's definition of emancipatory language. This kind of language, she emphasizes, "seeks to transform language use and to challenge stereotypical gender references."²⁴ Furthermore, nonsexist language is less transforming as it "seeks to avoid gender-specific terms, whereas, inclusive language seeks to balance gender references."²⁵

Importance of the Problem

During my first year as chaplain at Stephens College--a small, liberal arts, women's college in Columbia, Missouri--

²³ Kessler-Harris, B7.

²⁴ Marjorie Procter-Smith, In Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 63.

²⁵ Procter-Smith, 63.

I came to realize that religious life on the campus was in a state of decline and experiencing a time of transition. Our ministry programs, activities, and structure still reflected many of the academic, demographic, and religious assumptions of a bygone era that in the 1950s and 1960s had experienced a phenomenal rate of growth in student involvement and participation.

After my first month or so on the job, I determined that, if the religious ministries on our campus were going to be effective and/or beneficial, then we could no longer continue to function out of the framework of the religious life agenda of the past. Later in the year, at two different national, professional meetings for chaplains and directors of religious life, I learned that many other chaplains across the United States were also facing the challenges of decline and transition in their religious life programs, activities, and worship services. Therefore, in an attempt to understand this widespread phenomenon, to halt or reverse the decline, and to bring about change, I decided to look to the past, as well as to the present, for answers.

In my search for answers I was informed that Stephens was originally established as a Baptist school. Not long after, it became a private college. In the 1950s, religious life ministries, particularly those of Christian orientation, played a significant role in the life of the college. Consequently, for three decades the college was

more closely identified with, and for some years, defined itself by, its white, middle-to-upper-class, mostly Protestant, student population. I learned that in the 1950s the religious life activities, programs, and ministries (henceforth referred to as the chaplaincy) reached a pinnacle of success and growth; a decade or so later (1960s) the students responded creatively and positively to the experimentations of those years. Later, as the college moved through the 1970s, the administration gave some measure of attention to cultural and religious diversity by focusing on the particularism of its Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant religious organizations. Then, in the 1980s, the administration continued to emphasize their ongoing commitment to uphold and maintain their past religious traditions, programs, and activities that had for so long been successful and had given the chaplaincy its institutional identity.

Looking back at my first year at Stephens, I recall that the administration, faculty, and staff clearly exhibited external allegiance to the institution's belief in tolerance and diversity, experimenting with ways to carry this out. That is because, in the late 1980s and 1990s, our campus, like many others across the nation, had been greatly affected by the declining United States' economy and the radical changes emerging from a competitive global marketplace, along with rapidly increasing costs of living.

Thus, Stephens' administration, supported by the trustees, reacted to those changes by aligning their future program priorities for the school with their financial priorities. Therefore, the areas of humanities, religion, student services, and support staff services were cut. At the same time, financial problems were given as reasons for not hiring new faculty members who were persons of color. It was difficult to separate out legitimate financial cuts from those that were not legitimate and, therefore, which of the decisions made were in the best interests of the students.

One of these decisions affected the religious life ministries on campus. When the chaplain resigned in 1986, it was decided that the position would be cut to half-time, some of the religious life endowment department monies would be redirected into other special concerns by the president, and a major campuswide lecture series would be placed under the control of the president. I was told by a number of reliable persons that, had it not been for many loyal alumnae who financially supported the college, and remembered their religious life experiences with fondness and sentiment, the position of the chaplain, in all likelihood, would have been cut altogether from the budget of the college. Therefore, I knew that making changes in our ministries had the added limitations of time, reduction of power in the position, and lessening of support from the president.

Another phenomenon that also affected the chaplaincy in the eighties was the fact that many young people left the church in search of a more dynamic, contemporary religion or spirituality that would meet their needs. These students, and many who had grown up with very little or no religious background, had now become the majority on campus, as opposed to having been in the minority in the fifties, sixties, and seventies. In the midst of these sweeping changes, new religious forms and expressions, along with the persuasive influences of conservative and charismatic churches, became additional factions to place competing claims on the lives of students.

Living with this new diversity, and inevitable changes that continued to affect our campus, rendered me discouraged, frustrated, and confused as I continued to search for clues and answers to the future of religious life on campus. In my quest, I searched for the kinds of concrete programs, structures, and forms that I believed were needed in order to make changes in the chaplaincy relevant and accessible to the widest possible range of students. For example, I sought to include religiously diverse individuals and resources within all-campus religious events and convocations. I worked honestly and conscientiously at stretching the existing religious life structures to accommodate the pluralistic realities of our current student body and academic community.

In a short period of time, I discovered that change, restructuring, recovery, or transformation of an institution, department, or program does not come easily. My physical, psychological, and spiritual energies were easily drained when I attempted to change our institutional framework from its "withdrawal into sameness" to the more realistic, up-to-date, justice-bound "engagement with otherness."²⁶ I also learned that any ideas or resources for bringing about authentic change in this area were in short supply. While professional colleagues on campus or related to the campus--(chaplains, campus ministers, clergy, faculty, staff, and administration)--were sometimes academically informed and intellectually conversant with terms like "multiculturalism," "diversity," "identity," and "tolerance," many of them seemed to have little or no understanding of how to meet the religious needs of students except out of a homogeneous context. Eventually, I grew weary of my colleagues' lip-service commitments to change on our campus. I believed the time had come for all of us to face the reality that change was beckoning us into an uncharted, uncertain future, and change would require from us responses and decisions that would take vision and hope to see us through.

²⁶ See Donald G. Shockley, Campus Ministry: The Church Beyond Itself (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 46.

During my ministry at Stephens, I also came to realize my own complicity in this larger institutional system. Throughout that time I was not lacking in good will, sustained effort, or conscientious intentions. Nevertheless, I discovered that I could not become less of the problem and more of the solution until I came to terms with the elements of the system which were ingrained within me. These feelings could be likened to those expressed by Martin Luther King, Jr., who noted that segregation would never come to an end until African-Americans had expelled the *slave* within themselves.

Thus, I recognized that I must come to terms with things about myself that were in the way of my effectiveness as a college chaplain. I had to accept the fact that, in spite of my commitment to tolerance, diversity, and justice for all of creation, I had, nevertheless, been viewing my ministry and religious life on campus through my own cultural lenses of being white, female, middle-class, Euro-American, Christian, and Protestant.

I began to wonder whether my own religious and cultural questions were authentic or contrived ones. In the meantime, I also discovered that--as a woman having grown up in a patriarchal, institutional church system and a hierarchically-based society--I had yet to discover my own voice religiously. Thus, I was compelled to ask myself the question: How can I ever hope to be able to assist college

students in finding their own voices religiously or culturally when I have yet fully to find and give expression to my own?

Hence, the problem which has prompted this doctor of ministry project is at once institutional/communal and deeply personal as well. It is my desire in this project to make a contribution to the larger endeavor of college and university chaplaincy and to chaplains who continue to struggle with realities similar to those I have described above. Significantly, I also wish to give expression to the voice I found within myself as I worked, studied, and reflected in the doctor of ministry program.

Through my work as chaplain, and later as a doctoral student, I have further confirmed and concluded that the telling of one's own story is at the heart of one's development, theologically and religiously. This has led me to the thesis of this dissertation. The thesis is that college chaplains should utilize autobiography as a resource for ministry through personal and theological reflection within the context of the culturally and religiously diverse campus.

Work Previously Done in the Field

As I researched the available libraries for materials on the role and ministry of the college chaplain, I soon learned that there have been very few books written related to college chaplaincy but quite a few have been written on

the subject of campus ministry. Nevertheless, I deemed it important to include in this chapter a kind of chronological rendering of the service the books on campus ministry must have offered at the time of their publication. In order to keep with the chronological framework, those few books written on chaplaincy will appear at the appropriate places.

The first major, comprehensive work on the nature, work, roles, and future of college chaplaincies was published in 1954 by Seymour A. Smith in The American College Chaplaincy.²⁷ Smith's book originated as a study which was made in concert with his doctoral dissertation at Yale University. While his work is an important historical benchmark in the development of college chaplaincy, its direct relevance to the contemporary scene of the 1990s, as one would expect, is quite limited.

Other books also appeared during the fifties to assist the college chaplain, the campus minister, and her or his various constituencies. Some of these include an apology for personal theism by Chad Walsh, Campus Gods on Trial;²⁸ an anthology on evangelistic strategy, Witness to the Campus,²⁹ edited by Rober Ortmyer; and an autobiographical,

²⁷ Dr. Smith was later to serve as one of my distinguished predecessors as chaplain to Stephens College.

²⁸ See Chad Walsh, Campus Gods on Trial (New York: Macmillan Publs., 1953).

²⁹ See Roger Ortmyer, ed., Witness to the Campus (Nashville: National Methodist Student Movement, 1956).

non-fiction novel on the nature and theology of ministry on the campus by Ernest Gordon, Meet Me at the Door.³⁰

The next major study of the nature, purposes, and goals of both chaplaincy and campus ministry was undertaken under the auspices of the Danforth Foundation. It was conducted between 1963 and 1968, was national in scope, and was brought to publication in 1969 right after the death of its chief author and architect, Kenneth Underwood. Underwood's edited study, The Church, the University and Social Policy: The Danforth Study of Campus Ministries,³¹ contributed a helpful, theological typology under which to organize the functions and structures of such ministries as pastoral, priestly and preaching, teaching and prophetic inquiry, and administration and governance. His distinctive, constructive effort was to place on the campus ministry agenda (in explicit terms) a responsibility for addressing needs beyond those of individuals, namely, the needs of society for a more just social policy. For chaplaincy *per se*, his work included a terse, critical, but balanced, mini-history of college chaplaincy in the United States through the mid-1960s.

³⁰ See Ernest Gordon, Meet Me at the Door (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

³¹ See Kenneth Underwood, ed., The Church, the University, and Social Policy: The Danforth Study of Campus Ministries, 2 vols. (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1969).

Another important document which emerged in conjunction with the Danforth Study was the challenging analysis of the vocation of campus clergy by sociologist, Phillip E. Hammond in The Campus Clergyman.³² Hammond's chief contribution was to articulate and amplify the gains and the losses sustained through the increased professionalization of campus ministry in all of its varied forms, including chaplaincy.

Howard Thurman's autobiography, written in 1979, With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman, has influenced my thinking a great deal.³³ It is a moving story of his life, including how he plowed new ground as a black minister and educator whose vision for ministry was way ahead of its time. Two of his professional positions during a long career, are those in which he served as Dean of Rankin Chapel and Professor of Theology at Howard University, and later as Dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University. While serving on these campuses and in his other ministries, he devoted a lifetime to the causes of racial inclusiveness and racial equality.

The next effort to update the work of campus ministries in the United States was undertaken in 1982 by a doctor of ministry student at the School of Theology at Claremont (and

³² See Phillip E. Hammond, The Campus Clergyman (New York: Basic Books, 1966).

³³ See Howard Thurman, With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979).

former president of the National Campus Ministry Association), Allyn D. Axelton. The resulting doctor of ministry project was titled quite simply, An Appraisal of Campus Ministry.³⁴ His study sought to reassess the directions which campus ministry needed to take, given the changes emerging on college campuses during the decade of the 1970s. Axelton's work highlights three areas of change --in students, in social policies and practices, and in leadership development--that needed to be addressed by all forms of campus ministry, but especially those focused on public universities.

The following books are more recent works which were published in 1986 and provide some illumination for the issues I address in this dissertation. Thomas R. McCormick's book, Campus Ministry in the Coming Age examines the roots of campus ministry, its visions, weaknesses, and some of its success stories and offers its pages of oral history and practical advice as a tool for (Disciples) campus ministry.³⁵

The Program Committee for Education in the Society of the National Council of Churches developed a very resourceful anthology written by and for chaplains and

³⁴ See Allyn D. Axelton, An Appraisal of Campus Ministry (D.Min. Project., School of Theology at Claremont, 1982 (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1982)).

³⁵ See Thomas R. McCormick, Campus Ministry in the Coming Age (St. Louis: CBP Press, 1987), especially his chapter, "1986 and Beyond: Ministry for the Coming Age."

campus ministers from a variety of denominational perspectives.³⁶ Its contributors included two women, two persons of color, and representatives of a diversity of institutions who serve a diversity of populations. The first year I became a college chaplain, I read the book and found, though it was structured to serve as a study guide, it was too academically oriented and not practical-minded enough to meet my needs. However, I rediscovered it several years later and found the autobiographical meditations at the beginning of each section to be very warm and more enlightening than before.

Betsy Allen and Helen Neinast have edited yet another very comprehensive study guide for campus ministers and support groups connected with academia--Church and Campus Calling: A Collection of Resources for Ministries in Higher Education.³⁷

³⁶ See Robert Rue Parsonage, ed., Invitation to Dialogue: The Theology of College Chaplaincy and Campus Ministry (New York: National Council of Churches, 1986).

³⁷ See Betsy Alden and Helen Neinast, eds., Church and Campus Calling: A Collection of Resources for Ministries in Higher Education (Nashville: Board of Higher Education and Ministry, United Methodist Church, 1986). Particularly beneficial are contributions by Clyde O. Robinson, Jr., "Reflections at Thirty Thousand Feet"; Helen R. Neinast, "Ministry in Higher Education: Observations, Trends, and Emerging Concerns"; and Deb Dunlop and Theresa Cordova, "Empowering Ethnic Minority Women: A Curriculum Guide." These, along with articles by Don Shockley and Robert Epps, seek to address the challenges posed for chaplaincy by religious diversity on the college campus.

Donald G. Shockley in 1989 wrote Campus Ministry: The Church Beyond Itself.³⁸ As a former chaplain at Emory University and as an advocate of campus ministry, Shockley covers campus ministry from the perspectives of history, theology, and missions. His primary audience is pastors and laypersons, rather than campus ministers, and campus administrators and concerned faculty members who are curious about the church's ministry in higher education.

And, finally, Barbara Brummett's book, written in 1990, The Spirited Campus: The Chaplain and the College Community, identifies and explores some of the theological, professional, personal, and ethical issues related to the evolution of a college chaplaincy on the liberal arts campus. She utilizes narrative case studies as a tool to involve the reader in the process of decision making as a particular college chaplaincy is launched. Brummett's book is not only relevant to new and experienced college chaplains but to other ministers with college students, and to persons whose position or work on the campus in some way touches or affects that of the chaplain in the college setting because she addresses the question: How do we, as ministers, deal with institutional and social structures in establishing a specialized ministry? I found both her introductory chapter and her final chapter, "A Theology of

³⁸ Take note especially of Shockley's chapters found in the section, "Overcoming Our Fear of Otherness: A Theology of Campus Ministry," 45-86.

College Chaplaincy," to be the most rewarding and beneficial in the book.

The following books served as catalysts for stirring and nudging my imagination when I struggled to articulate my thoughts and form them into clear, cohesive, meaningful sentences. They also incarnated a personal theology (or theologies) that helped me to form my own as it related to narrative and the crucible of personal experience. In addition, they taught me about the importance of listening to others' stories--stories of oppression and liberation, stories of people of color, stories from various cultures, stories about women--as I attempt to serve as a college chaplain in a multicultural, multireligious setting. The books are: Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore's Teaching from the Heart: Theology and Educational Method;³⁹ John Navone's Towards a Theology of Story;⁴⁰ Religion as Story, edited by James B. Wiggins;⁴¹ William Bausch's Storytelling: Imagination and Faith;⁴² Chung Hyung Kyung's Struggle to Be

³⁹ See Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, Teaching from the Heart: Theology and Educational Method (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

⁴⁰ See John J. Navone, Towards a Theology of Story (Slough, England: St. Paul Publs., 1977).

⁴¹ See James B. Wiggins, ed. Religion as Story (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

⁴² See William Bausch, Storytelling: Imagination and Faith (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publs., 1984).

the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology;⁴³ The Mud Flower Collective's God's Fierce Whimsy: Christian Feminism and Theological Education;⁴⁴ and [Choan-Seng] Song's Theology from the Womb of Asia.⁴⁵

In conclusion, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge my shortcomings and limitations in being able to research the vast wealth of literature that has flooded the American market and scene on the issues and concerns of diversity, culture, race, gender, class, autobiography, liberation theology, feminism, and pluralism. Yet, I am deeply indebted to those authors who have courageously written about their experiences in order to make a difference in this world.

Scope, Limitations, and Method

Because religious and cultural diversity continues to have a growing impact and influence on all aspects of life on the college campus, the context for chaplaincy has been altered decisively, perhaps irrevocably. My purpose is to introduce, demonstrate, develop, and defend a strategy for the chaplain's ministry which both adapts to, and addresses,

⁴³ See Chung Hyun Kyung, Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990).

⁴⁴ See Mud Flower Collective, God's Fierce Whimsy: Christian Feminism and Theological Education (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1985).

⁴⁵ See [Choan-Seng] Song, Theology from the Womb of Asia (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986).

this altered context. I will seek to show how autobiographical thinking, reflecting, writing, and sharing can serve to enhance both the growth of the chaplain and the effectiveness of the chaplain's ministry among increasingly diverse students within a multicultural context.

Multiculturalism will not be defended as an ideology or a curricular program. Rather, it will be seen as a social and intellectual reality that exists today on most, if not all, campuses. This project will also suggest that one of the significant roles of the chaplain is to find ways to nurture and enhance meaningful community in the midst of existing cultural diversity on the campus.

In addition, it will also take into account the fact that campuses are becoming more and more religiously diverse. In fact, in the context of this growing diversity, few assumptions can be made religiously as we try to determine some central theological directions which a ministry focused on community-building can take. This means that the bridges for spanning the ever-changing, ever-deepening chasms of perceived differences must be built before they can be used. In a sense, then, this project is preliminary to the development of a full-orbed (systematic) theology of college chaplaincy.

Though there are other *winds of change* blowing through academia today, it is not the purpose of this project to cover all of those changes except at those points wherein

the changes have and are impacting the ministry of the college chaplain.

Autobiography will provide a framework, a method, and a context for the sharing of the chaplain's and the students' personal stories across lines of perceived differences. The larger goal for this kind of sharing is an integration and incarnation of these religious and cultural stories so that, in the words of Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, they become sources of theological truth that "reflect, bear, and critique culture."⁴⁶ Additionally, in this sharing, conflicting theological traditions can be formed and transformed, and stories that are larger than individual visions can point to the Divine Mystery behind all that is greater than ourselves.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Moore, 160.

⁴⁷ Moore, 157-62.

PART TWO

CHAPTER 2

Stories from My Story

The purpose of this chapter is to initiate the "action" which will allow me to operate within an action-reflection methodology to achieve the purposes for this project outlined in Chapter 1. This is to say that, before I become reflective regarding the meaning of autobiography as a tool for ministry, I am committed to demonstrate the method. At the same time, I can scarcely demonstrate various modes of autobiographical reflection unless I have provided autobiographical data upon which to reflect.

Accordingly, I have determined to be explicitly autobiographical myself in this chapter. At the same time, I have resisted the temptation to compose a summary of the totality of my days and nights upon this planet. Such a lengthy excursus would be neither wise nor prudent.

My concern is to express and illustrate who I am, and to do so autobiographically. To achieve this goal I need not be exhaustive nor rigorous in laying bare the details of my existence. A more pragmatic and promising approach is the one I have chosen.

Below, I will set forth three vignettes from my life. Each emerges from one of the three institutional centers (and meaning-intensive loci) which I found to be foundational to my self-understanding, both for good and for ill. These are my home and family, the local cinema (movie

theater) in my hometown, and the church which formed my first spiritual community.

Moreover, each vignette is presented to offer insights into persons, events, traditions, rituals, institutions, groups, places, stories, and other socializing influences which significantly impacted my developing self-concept, affected my feelings about myself, and both shaped and misshaped my world view. Accordingly, these vignettes should be seen as paradigmatic events. The events described in each one should not merely be viewed or observed. Rather, each should be seen as a lens or prism through which to look, in order to gain insight into the who that I am. In short, these paradigmatic stories are central to understanding my story.

The setting for each of these meaning-full events was the same, the large town (or small city, depending upon one's point of view) of Pampa, county seat for Gray County, in the panhandle of Texas. In the late 1940s and the 1950s, I grew up in a lower middle-class home as an identical twin, with two older (considerably older) siblings, both brothers.

The discrepancy in the ages of our brothers and ourselves is a matter of some significance. Our parents thought their family was complete; yet, right in the middle of World War II, my mother became pregnant. The family lore has it that my father was less than enthusiastic when he learned that he and my mother were to be blessed by a new

birth in the family. Indeed, as the story goes, when he heard from the attending physician that the new bundle of joy was actually two female bundles, he (reportedly) passed out. Even if the tale is apochryphal, it is a story with import for the context in which I came to self-awareness and grew into womanhood before leaving Pampa at the end of the summer following high school graduation in 1960.

Across those 18 years, Pampa was the center of my world. It gave me a language and introduced me to the universe. It also parochialized and limited me. For better or for worse, Pampa was my setting for becoming.

An Actress in My Own Home

I really liked living in our new house on 18th Street. Though it was now four years old, it seemed new to me. It was a far cry from the tiny first home in which I remember living--a duplex--when I was three and four years old. When I started kindergarten, we moved from that tiny home on Worley Street to 212 North Faulkner. This house was also small for a family of six, but it was bigger than our last home. It had two bedrooms, one bath, a living room with only a floor furnace for heat, a combination kitchen and dining room, and a garage that my dad and brothers converted into a third bedroom for my brothers, Dave and Ben. I loved my brothers' bedroom best because it was the largest room in the house, and it was further away from my parents' bedroom. Of course, my brothers said their bedroom was off limits to

little sisters. However, my sister (Rita) and I were very good at sneaking into their room while they were gone and had learned the art of making the room look, upon our departure, just like it did before we invaded it.

This house was filled with many firsts for Rita and me: first parakeet, first phonograph player, first guppies, first bicycle, first home from which we could walk to school, first cake baked, first beauty contest (held in our friend's garage down the street), first birthday party, first time I fainted, first time to climb a tree then swing down from a rope like Tarzan did in the movies, and first electric stove (which our brother won in a drawing at the movie theater).

My grandfather, my dad, and my brothers worked together with a few other hired workers to build our next home on 18th Street. The area where it was built was a brand new housing development. I wanted badly to help in the construction part of the framing of the house but was told by Dad that it was man's work and not a place for girls to be seen. This was the typical response from him because he believed that little girls and women had their place in the home where they were to be submissive, domestic, self-denying servants and good mothers.

As a young child having to live by the rules of an authoritarian father was not easy. And, it was especially difficult living with Dad's mood swings brought on by the

difficulties he faced in life. He was constantly teased as a teenager because of his Native American looks and heritage. He dropped out of high school and never graduated. His insecurities as a father and as a husband led to verbal and physical abuse to his family and affairs with other women.

Mom had a different background from Dad's. Her mother had come to the United States from Italy with her parents when she was four years old. As immigrants wanting to fit into the melting pot, they changed their last name from Pillasero to Pillow. Grandma, Malia Marguerite, later met and married James Madison Walker, also an immigrant who had served in the Italian cavalry.

When my grandfather died, Mom was four years old, one sister was two, and the other seven children were older. Grandma found a job as a housekeeper and cook for several families in Pampa while the older children found homes and jobs on several nearby farms. Much to Grandma's regret and disappointment, the rest of the children had to be placed in the Odd Fellows' Orphans Home in Corsicana, Texas. It was in the Home that Mom, who was a tall, slender, beautiful girl, learned how to take risks in order to be happy, how to be grateful for what little she did have, and how to build skills and utilize them in order to survive the difficulties of being poor and not growing up in a home with her family of origin. Ironically though, she found herself also having to cope with the jealousy of two of her sisters.

Mom and Dad (Stella and Russell) met each other at a grocery store after Mom had moved to Pampa where more of her family members lived. Neither one of them had jobs when they secretly drove to Clovis, New Mexico, and were married by the justice of the peace. Even after their marriage, Dad continued to work hard at fitting into a world where he was considered different from everyone else. During that same time Mom tried to cope with her needs for affection and affirmation, a sense of family and connection to a community, and her need to be herself as a woman living in a man's world.

Therefore, subconsciously I knew when I was told that a construction site was not a place for girls to be seen, that Mom would understand how I felt about being shut out. So, every two or three days when she went to the site to make her own inspection of the progress that had been made on our house, she took Rita and me with her to explore and discover every inch of the house that we wanted to explore. She even answered whatever questions we had and didn't think they were stupid ones.

When we finally moved into our new red brick house on the corner of the street, I loved waking up each morning in my new bedroom, even though I had to share it with my sister. I loved it because it was new, because Rita and I were able to choose the color of paint for the walls, and best of all, because the two of us had a little bit more

space in which to negotiate life lived together as teenagers in a room with no privacy.

Unfortunately, we were to be reminded again and again that, though we were living in a greater physical space, the psychic space which that house allowed seemed only to shrink from year to year. Put another way, we found ourselves frequently disappointed to rediscover that building a house was far easier for our family than building a home.

In the fall of 1959, this particular Saturday morning began like any other Saturday during the school year for me, a senior in high school. The house was quiet because both of my brothers were no longer living at home. Dad was to return from another one of his frequent, out-of-town business trips in time for supper that evening. Therefore, Mom thoughtfully let Rita and me sleep late. She knew how tired we were on the morning after cheerleading at the high school football game the night before.

The two of us woke up about the same time that morning. Though it was nearly ten o'clock, it was hard to leave the comfort and security of our twin beds. We knew that once our feet touched the floor we would have to face the chores of the day. So, we delayed the inevitable, snuggled more deeply into our sheets and blankets, and began to talk about the events of the night before--who had a date with whom and what we thought about it; the things we did on the football field to get the guy sitting in the football stands whom we

most wanted to date to notice us; those girls who were popular, beautiful, had great figures, could buy whatever clothes they wanted, and knew how to manipulate guys into asking them out on dates. It seemed that as teenagers, more than anything else in the world, we wanted money, power, popularity, love, and success because we believed those things were the keys to true happiness.

Eventually, Rita said to me, "I guess we'd better go ahead and get up. You know all the chores we've got to get done today as well as all that homework we have to do before Monday morning. I sure don't want to deal with Dad's anger if we don't have everything done when he arrives home tonight."

When we finished our chores, we sat down on the front porch of our house and watched the sun go down on the horizon. The air was still and calm and the cirrus clouds lazily stretched themselves out over the sky, adding to the tranquility of the moment. Since our house on 18th Street was the ninth one to be built in our sub-division, there were very few trees or houses to block our view across the barren, flat land that was characteristic of our community. Thus, from the front porch I could enjoy and savor each and every sunrise and sunset as it cast its magical spell across the vast Texas sky.

This Saturday evening was no exception. The incredibly vivid colors of the sunset--red, pink, purple, yellow,

orange--drenched the darkening, deep blue sky, causing me to feel an awesome presence of something greater than and bigger than the world itself.

As I sat on the porch, other memories flooded my mind. I remembered the day in 1957 when my oldest brother, Dave, came home for his break from his training in the Marines' Officer Candidate School in Maryland. He looked older and more self-confident as he walked onto the porch wearing his Marine uniform. He had only been home for a day when Dad insisted that he put on his uniform so he could show him off to his friends. Dave put up a good verbal fight but Dad made him feel guilty and obligated enough to obey his father that he eventually gave in to Dad's request.

The next year Dave had to return home for a different reason. Mom was very ill and was placed in the hospital for a severe case of arthritis but with unidentified medical complications. Rita and I were never told about the severity of her illness. Within a few days, Mom lapsed into a coma, and while in the coma, she had a mild heart attack. Dave and Ben (who was in the Army and stationed in Germany), were both called home because Mom was at the point of death.

After four days of touch-and-go, life-and-death situations, Mom came out of the coma and eventually recovered. However, the arthritis left her disabled to the point that she couldn't walk. Each morning for the rest of the school year Dad or another high school teacher or

teachers would carry Mom out of our house and place her in the car.

When she arrived at the high school where she worked as secretary to the principal, bookkeeper, and student services' office manager, there were two students ready and watching for her car to drive up to the main entrance on the back side of the school. These students would make a chair with their arms together and carry Mom to her desk in the principal's office. They would repeat this procedure at the end of the day. Because she was so well-liked at the school, a variety of male students volunteered to help transfer her daily to and from the car as well as carry her up and down the stairs each day at lunch time.

Throughout Mom's illness I remember sitting on this same front porch of the house on 18th Street filled with memories and thinking and wondering about what these events and experiences in my life meant. Sometimes I did my thinking near the porch while lying down on the grass at night looking up at the deep, deep blue-almost-black sky and trying to count the hundreds of brightly glowing, twinkling stars that connected me to another world I had never seen before.

For a moment, on this particular Saturday, my memories faded and I was pulled back to the present. As I watched the colors in the sky begin to change and fade into night, I heard Mom's voice through the open, front, screened door,

"Girls, I'm home. Come on in now. I hope you've finished your chores and your homework. Your father just telephoned and he's bringing guests home again for supper. I wish he wouldn't do this to us. I don't like these kinds of surprises. Oh, well. Set the table for two more. I've got to run to the store and buy some more steak and a few more potatoes. While I'm gone, boil some more water for tea so it will have time to cool before we add the ice cubes to it. Cut up some more lettuce, celery, cucumbers, tomatoes, and carrots for the salad and put some cloth napkins on the table instead of the paper ones. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Rita and I dreaded these times when Dad brought customers from work home with him for supper. Mealtime was a time when we were supposed to be on our best behavior so we would reflect good, moral upbringing by our parents. We had had much practice for the roles we were to play when guests were in our home. During the meal we were to be good like angels, to obey and be submissive to those in authority, to be polite and respectful in our manners, to exhibit a constant attitude of gratitude, and to speak only when spoken to. After supper our role was to quietly and dutifully clear the table, rinse off and stack the dishes, then organize them according to the way they would be washed and dried. As usual, before we could begin washing the dishes, Dad played his role in this guests-for-supper ritual

by repeating those often-heard words, "Girls, come here a minute. I've told Mr. Thornburg and Mr. White about how the two of you are honor students, about some of the awards you've won, about some of your achievements, and about some of the different things you're involved in at school and at church."

The two of us looked at each other in disgust and disappointment and made faces that said "Here we go again" as we left the kitchen to silently obey Dad. As we entered the living room, Mr. Thornburg said to Dad, "How do you tell them apart? I've never seen a set of twins look so much alike as your daughters. Do you know which one is which?" As the two of us expected, Dad guessed wrongly, calling me Rita and her Nita. We faked a smile at Dad, laughed a little, and told Dad he'd guessed wrongly. He then responded to his friend with an embarrassed laugh and said, "Hell, I can't always tell them apart either. Rita and Nita, why don't you go into your bedroom and put on your cheerleading uniforms and come back and do a few cheers for our guests, do a little singing, and then play a few duets on the piano?"

While Rita and I changed into our uniforms, we complained to each other about being coerced to perform for guests in our home. I was angry and said to her, "I'm sick and tired of doing this. I don't want to do it any more. I wish I could just walk into the living room right now and

tell Dad that I don't want to be on display any more. I'm tired of feeling like a showpiece or trophy. I want to be me for once. I want to be an individual who is unique and different from my twin sister. I want to shake his shoulders and say, 'Look at me. I have feelings. I have needs. I am a person not a thing. Why can't you see that?'" Of course, this was a conversation Rita and I had had between the two of us many times before.

Soon, our clothes were changed, and we nervously returned to the living room to perform on cue in the role of actresses in our own home. We knew that, if we screwed up or spoke our real feelings, we would be severely reprimanded and might face the consequences of being spanked with Dad's leather belt that left whelps and red marks on our bodies. We desperately wanted love and attention from Dad and lived in constant fear of rejection and abandonment. Therefore, we optimistically hoped that by being good and obedient--like servants--that our relationship with him, over time, would change.

When we finished performing, we were thanked, sent to our bedroom, and expected to remain there for the rest of the evening. As the two of us sat on our twin beds looking at each other, we felt a bond between us that didn't require words or actions at this point. We felt sadness about being coerced into being someone other than ourselves. While at the same time, we felt a sense of triumph that, for the sake

of our good and well-being, we had been able to gracefully and creatively pull off another polished performance.

The Best Picture Show

Being identical twins in the 40s and 50s was both a blessing and a curse. Twins were looked upon as novelty items, circus sideshow entertainment, or rare commodities to be placed on display. Because our dad bought into this societal view about twins, there was no place we could go to hide from the unique attention we received. I can still hear those familiar, aggravating words repeated incessantly, but never maliciously, by strangers when they saw the two of us together. They would say to Mom, "Oh, aren't they cute. Why, they look exactly alike. How do you ever tell them apart?" Mom would respond with, "Well, they don't look alike to me." Then, the strangers would turn and say to the two of us, "I bet you like being a twin. It must be really fun. I can't get over how much you two look alike." They would stare at us for a few more seconds, say goodbye, and go on their way.

When we were five years old, our grandparents, Honey and George, began taking the two of us regularly to the drive-in movie theater on the western edge of town. George was a professional carpenter and owned his own cabinet shop. He was a tall, slender, gentle, quiet man who had lived with his family on the Choctaw reservation in Oklahoma until he was eight years old. His family then took the train to

Texas to find work and a place to live in order to survive and escape the bad living conditions on the reservation. In his quiet, shy, unassuming way, George showed his love for Rita and me by teaching us how to hammer a nail into a piece of wood, answering our questions about his work, and paying us a quarter or fifty cents apiece for sweeping up the sawdust, scrap wood pieces, and nails on the shop floor.

Our grandmother, Adeline Serepta (Addie for short but nicknamed Honey by our brother Dave), was a little over five feet tall, weighed about 220 pounds, was very plain-looking, and was a wonderful cook. Since Honey and George's apartment-like home was built onto the back side of the cabinet shop, Honey could serve as the manager/bookkeeper of their business and work as a homemaker as well. Her hobbies consisted of raising hens for their food, growing and landscaping a wide variety of flowers in their backyard, and creating and making unique, wooden lamps decorated on four sides with natural flowers and brightly-hued butterflies ordered from a catalogue. In her spare time she taught Rita and me how to drive their pickup truck, how to write checks and pay bills for the shop, and how to develop a taste for hot tea. I remember being fascinated as I watched her create a pattern for a dress, cutting it out from the material she had purchased from the Montgomery Ward catalogue, and then sewing all of it together by hand.

Though she was an amazing woman, as a teenager I experienced her own insecurities through her strict, biased restrictions regarding night-time curfews. Because she was lonely and isolated herself from meaningful relationships, she lived her life through her family members. There were many days, nights, weekends, and several vacation times when Rita and I were left to stay with Honey and George. As we grew older and returned from running errands for Honey, she became the Grand Inquisitor wanting to know where we had been, with whom we had talked, and what our conversations had been about. When we were in high school, Rita and I found ourselves lying to her about where we were going because she was prejudiced about two of our friends from school whom she said "lived in the wrong part of town and came from poor families."

Nevertheless, I loved my grandparents and knew they loved me. I will always remember with fondness those many Indian Summer kinds of nights spent with Honey and George at the drive-in theater. Before the movie began, the four of us would eat supper together in the pickup truck. Then, Rita and I would run to the playground in front of the movie screen and thoroughly enjoy swinging on the swings and sliding down the slide. At that time, one of the highlights of the evening, for me, would be looking up at the countless stars in the remarkably clear, unpolluted sky above and taking delight in the moment.

When the cartoons began, the two of us were to return to the truck. We then enjoyed the freedom of standing in the bed of the truck and leaning against the cab while we watched the film. Halfway through the movie there would be a brief intermission, just long enough for George to go and come from the concession stand, bringing back soda and popcorn for all of us. By the time the movie was over, Rita and I were squeezed into the front seat of the truck and were asleep minutes before we arrived at our grandparents' home. Those special family trips to the drive-in not only made me feel loved and secure, but they birthed within me an intimate connection or bond with the medium of film. And, more importantly, each movie gave me the chance to escape the ever-watching, staring eyes of strangers who had no idea what it was like to be a twin.

There were two other movie theaters in Pampa. Both were located downtown on opposite ends of Main Street. One was built for "whites only" and the other one was built for "blacks only" (and other marginalized people). I remember being curious about why the blacks not only had their own separate movie theater but why they lived in a separate town within Pampa that was surrounded by a rickety, unkept, green picket fence. This smaller, segregated part of town contained a grocery store, gas station, school for young children through ninth grade, and the homes of all persons who were not white. I didn't understand why. I was taught

to fear black men and to believe that black people were inferior to whites. I didn't understand why. When, as a young child, I went with Mom to pick up our ironing at the home of a black woman, I was surprised to see that she and her children didn't look or act any different from white people I knew. I didn't understand why. The woman who had done our ironing only spoke after Mom spoke to her. She only responded with, "Yes, mam," "No, mam," and "Thank you, mam." I didn't understand why.

On one occasion Mr. Wilhelm, the father of our best friend, Lynda, and manager of all three movie theaters in Pampa, took Lynda, Rita, and me to the "blacks only" theater and let us watch a movie from the balcony. I didn't understand why the theater was smaller and had fewer conveniences than the "whites only" theater. I couldn't understand why white people were afraid of black people. Everyone I observed in the theater was very polite and friendly with each other, and certainly no one appeared to be there for the sake of being violent. For the rest of the time I lived in Pampa, I was very confused about the mixed messages I had received about black people. The theater played an enormous role in my world view.

On a warm, dry, windy, June, panhandle-of-Texas morning in 1952, Rita and I bounded out of bed and were filled with excitement. We had completed the fifth grade and school was finally out for the summer. Lynda telephoned and invited

the two of us to go to the movies with her. This was the day her father was scheduled to work at the "whites only" theater, so the three of us could be treated to a free movie.

I kept watching the clock on the kitchen wall, anxiously waiting for the time to come for Mom to drive us downtown to the movie theater. I loved going to the movies. Before the movie began and during the intermission, I particularly liked watching all of the teenagers. I looked at the teenage girls and thought about what it would be like to be older and able to make decisions on my own. I looked at the guys and tried to picture what it would be like to have a date with one of them to the movies. I couldn't wait to grow up! Going to the movies was a great way for me to image my future and to be able to escape from the confines and boundaries of my own limited world.

Mom drove us downtown, gave us some spending money, and let us out on the corner where the theater was located. After we picked up our tickets at the box office window, we met Lynda at the entrance to the theater. Once we were inside the lobby, the three of us darted for the concession stand. We giggled with our short-lived freedom of being little girls on our own with no one watching us or telling us what we could or could not do. I spent some of my money at the concession stand on a large dill pickle on which I could nibble and make last throughout the entire film.

As I walked down the theater aisle, a familiar happiness began to spread throughout my entire body. I felt good because I could separate my troubles and worries from myself and leave them behind on the other side of the theater door. Like other movie-explorers before me, I had come to discover and claim this world as mine, and no one could take it from me. When I sat down on the theater seat with my long-lasting dill pickle in hand, I knew I was now ready for my next movie adventure. Though I didn't know what shape or form it would take, I was prepared to take on a new identity within that ever-so-short space of time of one to two hours.

Through the incredible medium of film, I had discovered that I could lose myself on the silver screen and become anyone I wanted to be. Today's film made it easy for me to make that choice. Esther Williams, one of my favorite actresses, was starring in the lead female role. She had always been a heroine and role model for me since the first time I saw her in a movie. I dreamed of someday looking like her and becoming an actress like her. Each of her films reminded me of the time that Rita and Lynda said to me, "Did you know that you look a little bit like Esther Williams and that sometimes you even act like her?" Well, my ego skyrocketed and soared to unbelievable heights that day, and I began to imagine myself as being somewhat like my heroine even though I knew the two of them were teasing me.

I wanted so much to have my own identity and to be like my heroine--another woman whom I admired--that I pretended to believe what they said about me was true.

The film began and soon Esther Williams appeared on the screen. Within seconds I found myself mesmerized in her presence and caught up in a world very much unlike my own. Immediately, I became the person on the screen saying Esther Williams' lines and bringing her character to life. As the story of the film unfolded, I was the one who took the risks and dove off the incredibly high cliff into the ocean, not Esther. Later in the film, I was the one, not Esther, who performed water acrobatics in the nightclub act with great precision and skill.

Throughout most of the film, the leading woman (Esther Williams) and the leading man find themselves arguing or in the midst of irreconcilable differences when they are together. However, as movies go, they fall in love, love conquers all, and their conflicts are solved. The screenplay ends with the camera zooming in to do close-ups of each of their faces as they speak to each other. He looks at her with dreamy love in his eyes, takes one of her hands and holds it to his chest, and then asks her in a gentle, mellow voice, "Darling, will you marry me?" She responds to him with tears of joy in her eyes and a whisper in her voice, "Oh, yes, Jeffrey, I will!" As they kiss, the music becomes more melodramatic and intensely

romantic. And, somehow in that moment of embrace, I find a small ray of hope that someday, like Esther Williams, I can be who I want to be, that I can be the one in control of my life, and that I can discover what my purpose in life is to be.

What Is Your Confession of Faith?

From the earliest time I can remember First Baptist Church (FBC) played an enormous role in my life. It was the largest church in Pampa, with First Methodist Church running a close second in size and activities. A number of other religious groups were represented in the community as well-- Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Pentecostal, Seventh Day Adventist, Quaker, Mormon, Roman Catholic, and Jewish.

One of my favorite times of the year was our annual "March-to-Church-in-March-Sunday." On the first Sunday of each March, the members of all of the downtown churches would park their cars seven or eight blocks from several of the churches, and we would walk together down the middle of certain streets (blocked off by the police) to our respective places of worship.

When I was nine years old, I attended Vacation Bible School (VBS) for two weeks at FBC. On the last morning of VBS during worship, I made a public profession of my faith as a Christian. I was then told that in order to make this official and to be able to become a church member, I would need to make my commitment public at the end of the worship

service on the following Sunday morning. I was terrified! I wondered, "Why do I have to do this twice? Why couldn't Dr. Carver, my pastor, and the other church members understand the courage it took for me to walk down that long sanctuary aisle and speak to Dr. Carver the first time?"

When Sunday rolled around, I found myself sitting upstairs in our sanctuary in a pew with Mom and Rita during worship. At its conclusion there was the ritual singing by the congregation of the hymn of invitation and the pastor's altar call for those desiring or needing to make public decisions for Christ. I finally mustered up the courage to make my way down the stairs to the front of that foreboding sanctuary to once again state my profession of faith to Dr. Carver. Then, when the church members came by to shake my hand at the conclusion of the service--a significant ritual in our tradition--I was overwhelmed and astounded by their genuinely sincere joy regarding my decision.

The next step in the process upon which I had embarked was to symbolically show and seal my commitment to the Christian faith through the public act of baptism by immersion. By the time I met with Dr. Carver to talk about my baptism, I found myself to be a bundle of nerves. I had this reaction because Dr. Carver had been placed on an unrealistic, unreachable pedestal by the congregation. He was perceived to be God's representative to God's people. Often he preached about the impending judgment of God on all

of us as sinners unless we repented of our sins. By and large, those sermons produced guilt feelings in me and overshadowed my own sense of personal worth or forgiveness from God. However, as a young child my image of my pastor was also a positive one during those times when he gave me attention and love, and exhibited his deep love for God, his family, and the congregation.

The time I spent with Dr. Carver talking about my baptism was not painful or scary as I thought it might be. He merely questioned me about my decision to become a Christian and wanted to know my reasons why. He explained to me the process, date, and time for my baptism, and concluded our time together with a prayer. It was an affirming experience.

Because I was so excited about being baptized, I invited my aunt and uncle (who were members of the other Baptist church in Pampa) to attend my baptism. As I walked into the baptismal pool and could see the people in the pews, I caught a glimpse of Mom and Aunt Alma and Uncle Nat. I felt a surge of pride rush through me as I glanced down at the white baptismal robe I was wearing. Because I wanted to do everything right and in order, I followed all of Dr. Carver's instructions to the letter. As I walked to the center of the baptismal pool, I wrestled with the water that surrounded my body up to my chest. I crossed my arms in an x-shape and laid my palms flat over my chest. Dr. Carver

raised one arm with the palm of his hand open as if to communicate with God on my behalf and to consecrate this moment as holy. He then spoke the familiar words of my faith that I had committed to memory from all the other baptisms I had observed throughout my church life:

"What is your confession of faith?" he asked.
"Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior," I replied. Then he responded with these words, "Upon your confession of Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, I baptize you, Nita Faye Cartwright,¹ in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost."

Following the affirmation of my confession, as Dr. Carver had assured me he would do, he covered my mouth and nose with a folded white handkerchief. This was my cue to close my eyes, and with strength and care, he dipped me into the water.

To describe the remainder of my experience is difficult. I do not remember if Dr. Carver actually said the following words as I came up out of the water--"buried with Christ in baptism and raised to walk in newness of life"--or if the words were familiar because of an earlier scripture verse having been committed to my memory. What I do remember is the experience of feeling like the baptismal waters were alive with energy and I felt like I had become one with that energy. That was surprising to me because I had walked into this experience with a strong fear of

¹ In 1972 I legally changed my name from Nita Faye Cartwright to Ashli Cartwright-Peak--Peak being my married name.

drowning, since I had nearly drowned at an earlier age and I did not know how to swim.

As I struggled to walk out of the water weighted down by my wet, heavy baptismal robe, I felt courageous, strong, and empowered because of my profession of faith and commitment as a new Christian. I also felt ecstatic because my decision to make a public profession of faith was the first important decision I had made independent of my twin sister. It was an exhilarating experience that brought me face to face with the mystery of God and God's grace. At the conclusion of the baptismal service, the people of the church welcomed me with open arms into the community of faith. I will never forget that Sunday night.

After individuals were baptised, church members were expected to serve as mentors, spiritual guides, and Christian examples for the new Christians. "Looking back, it is clear to me that the watchful attention of. . . [the church members and the ministers] served to enhance my consciousness that whatever I did with my life *mattered*."²

In the energetic, activist environment of a local Baptist congregation in the 1950s, such "doing" with one's life was not merely encouraged, it was expected. Accordingly, I quickly found myself caught up in a myriad of activities, organizations, and relationships which would decisively shape my future.

² Thurman, 20.

Other events and experiences in FBC left an indelible imprint on my life as well. They contributed positively to my sense of self-worth. One such valuable experience was the young girls' missions organization, Girls Auxiliary (G.A.'s). Every Wednesday afternoon at 4:00 p.m. after school, the elementary-aged girls would meet at the church for G.A.'s to hear stories about earlier and present-day home and foreign missionaries and their work in various countries and the United States. I found their stories fascinating and intriguing. Several times during the year we were privileged to meet some of our missionaries and hear their stories in person.

Besides listening to the various, memorable stories, we made crafts related to the various countries and learned some of their songs. Individually, we contributed weekly an undesignated amount of money to a collection that was gathered and later sent to specific missionaries to meet a specific need.

A portion of our time together was set aside for work on the G.A. Steps which included memory work, writing, reading, and craft-making. As each step was completed, we advanced to work on an increasingly more difficult step. Then, at the end of the year, a special coronation service would be held to recognize those girls who had completed certain steps during the year and to highlight some of their achievements.

Of course, our weekly meetings were concluded sometimes with a special snack made by our leader, Mrs. Franklin, to give us a glimpse and taste of a culture other than our own. On other occasions, Mrs. Franklin would bake us a delicious homemade food, such as, brownies, fudge, or gingerbread with whipped creme, or make us a special drink, such as, homemade hot chocolate or a milkshake.

At the conclusion of G.A.'s each week, we were responsible for setting the tables in Fellowship Hall for the Wednesday evening meal before the weekly congregational prayer meeting. After we served the food, we gathered in the church kitchen where the cook gave us large helpings (if we wanted them) of the same delicious homecooked meal along with her mouth-watering, homemade rolls and iced tea. Ummm-mmm good!

My experiences in G.A.'s reached their peak in my life on a Sunday morning when I was in high school. For a number of years I had confidentially thought about becoming a missionary but never told anyone. On this particular morning, at the end of the worship service when commitments to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and commitments to Christian service were called for, I walked to the front of the FBC sanctuary, took Dr. Carver's hand, and dedicated my life to missionary service. Little did I know what this kind of open-ended commitment would mean for my future.

CHAPTER 3

Finding Myself in a Context of Meaning:

Seeing My Story in Others' Stories

Central to this project is the belief that the challenge of chaplaincy on campuses today includes helping students discover, even within the ordinary events of their lives, some sense of meaning. Just how essential this is to the human enterprise only began to become clear to me in adulthood. Nonetheless, as I have reflected on the persons, events, and places that contributed to my own discoveries of ways to make meaning in my life, I must acknowledge that much of my introduction (and instruction) in meaning making took place, principally, in the context of First Baptist Church of Pampa. Specifically, my childhood and youth experiences during the mid-week worship services, known as Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting, exposed me (intuitively) to the concepts of meaning making. In addition to the singing of hymns, prayer, and a brief homily by the pastor, the centerpiece of this center of the week was "testimony time."

During testimonies lay people in the congregation would spontaneously stand one at a time to testify to God's work in their lives. They told stories about conversion experiences, healings of illnesses, answers to prayer, and more. Unwittingly, I was mentored in how to give my personal testimony and to find meaning in unexpected and ordinary places.

On the one hand, testimonies were as unique and individual as the persons who gave them. Yet, there was a remarkable continuity across individuals in the story lines they used. For in each instance, these (mostly blue collar) people testified that God was intimately involved in the mundane, everyday events of their lives. Hence, from my childhood, I had a frame of reference for meaning making--at least one which I saw to be meaningful for adults, if not so for me.

James McClendon grew up in a similar Baptist church in a working class neighborhood on the south end of Shreveport, Louisiana. He too was introduced early on to testimony meetings and the role of individuals' stories of faith in the facilitating of maturation in character of individuals and the ongoing life of the church. In Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology, McClendon took the insights of our common heritage and demonstrated their relevance for the self-understanding of the larger Christian community.¹ He did so by drawing on the living testimonies of five remarkable figures from recent Christian history.

What both McClendon and I had drawn upon from our earliest years, he made available as a gift to the larger community of faith. In that same spirit, I want to be a

¹ See James W. McClendon, Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974).

part of a process in which collegians and others, in search of a sense of significance for their days and nights, can come to discover that their mundaneness can be reframed as meaningfulness.

When students come to college they are looking for someone or something to help them make meaning of their lives and to find a sense of purpose and fulfillment in the present and in their hopes and dreams for the future. Often times, meaning for students can be found merely by connecting their stories with other persons' stories. Sometimes the stories can be helpful in their similarity or universality; sometimes they can be radically dissimilar and help students to see their own story more clearly; or sometimes the way a story is told can make a difference in students' lives. For example, in her remarkable book, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, Annie Dillard addresses the issue of meaning making with astonishing clarity and poignancy.

There is a way a wave rises above the ocean horizon, a triangular wedge against the sky. If you stand where the ocean breaks on a shallow beach, you see the raised water in a wave is translucent, shot with lights. One late afternoon at low tide a hundred big sharks passed the beach near the mouth of a tidal river in a feeding frenzy. As each green wave rose from the churning water, it illuminated within itself the six- or eight-foot-long bodies of twisting sharks. The sharks disappeared as each wave rolled toward me; then a new wave would swell above the horizon, containing in it, like scorpions in amber, sharks that roiled and heaved. The sight held awesome wonders: power and beauty, grace tangled in a rapture with violence.

We don't know what's going on here. If these tremendous events are random combinations of matter

run amok, the yield of millions of monkeys at millions of typewriters, then what is it in us, hammered out of those same typewriters, that they ignite? We don't know. Our life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery, like the idle, curved tunnels of leaf miners on the face of a leaf. We must somehow take a wider view, look at the whole landscape, really see it, and describe what's going on here. Then we can at least wail the right question into the swaddling band of darkness, or, if it comes to that, choir the proper praise.²

When I read Dillard's words for the first time, I identified immediately with her search for meaning because her words beautifully describe a way she made meaning out of that particular experience. First she had the experience, then she described it, and this followed with an interpretation or an attempt to make meaning out of the experience.

As a college chaplain, it is important to help students discover ways to make connections between their story and others' stories in their quest for meaning making. One way the chaplain can do this is to look at the various natural ways connections are often made for individuals. As illustrated above, stories in books are readily available as a meaning making resource, along with stories found on or in film, videotapes, plays, television, rituals, worship, religious traditions, and special events.

The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate one resource that I have found beneficial in my own life because

² Annie Dillard, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 8-9.

it has helped me to imaginatively transcend the limits of home, family, school, church, and work. The stories in film have expanded my horizons, and my sense of possibilities and alternatives has been magnified. As a young girl, the silver screen at the movie theater downtown could transport me to a new level of potentiality and self-determination, even if only vicariously. However, I must confess that my own understanding of making meaning from the events, people, and interactions of daily existence emerged neither rapidly nor early in my life. Rather, it emerged at an intuitive level early in my experience and later progressed into a clearer recognition of the importance of articulating meaning for my life. However, through the years, the medium of film has become a rich source of meaning making in my growth and development as a person. In recent years, the small but significant increase in the numbers of films being produced about the experiences and relationships of women has been especially helpful.

Several of these films have concentrated on women from Texas and/or elsewhere in the South. I have found them to be particularly valuable to me as reservoirs of metaphors, images, and insights, all necessary ingredients in the task of finding meaning in one's own life. Stated alternatively, I have come to see in the content of others' stories, especially as portrayed in film, resources for giving meaning to the events and challenges of my personal story.

Particularly poignant in this respect for me have been three feature films made between 1984 and 1992, Thelma and Louise, Places in the Heart, and Fried Green Tomatoes.³ Accordingly, I wish to analyze these films in some depth in this chapter. My reason for doing so is to make evident how films have served, and continue to serve, as a context for making meaning out of the facts of my existence and to model for the chaplain a method for doing the same with students.

Thelma and Louise⁴

In Ridley Scott's courageous feminist film, "Thelma and Louise," Thelma and Louise are cast in the roles of women who are trying to break free from the "men who have suppressed every aspect of their existence."⁵ Thelma (Geena Davis) is a naive, lanky, unhappy, Arkansas housewife "trapped in a claustrophobic marriage," and Louise (Susan Sarandon) is a "harrassed, coffee shop waitress."⁶ The tone is set in the opening scenes, caricaturing "the dull

³ Quotes cited in this chapter that are not footnoted are direct quotes recorded from videotapes of the original movies. Thus, the director of each film, as indicated in a reference note number at the beginning of each of the next three sections of this chapter, will be given indirect credit for the appropriate quotation.

⁴ Ridley Scott, dir., Thelma and Louise, with Susan Sarandon, Geena Davis, and Harvey Keitel, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1991.

⁵ Edmond Grant, review of Thelma and Louise, Films in Review 42 (1991): 256.

⁶ Janet Abrams, review of Thelma and Louise, Sight and Sound, June 1991, 55.

routines and unfulfilling relationships from which the women seek escape" on a weekend fishing trip at a friend's cabin in the mountains in Louise's 1966 Thunderbird convertible.⁷ Writer Kathleen Murphy says that, as the movie begins, Thelma and Louise take the first step in disengaging themselves from "old 'frames' of reference," moving from station to station marking their "rites of passage" as they let go of the past and stake a claim on their future.⁸ The weekend trip becomes a symbol of their determination to break free of their dependency on the two men in their lives--a cheating, sexist husband and an unstable, unreliable male-friend.

The first step of letting go that Louise takes before she leaves on her trip is to turn her lover's picture face down when she telephones him and gets his answering machine. Thelma's first step of risk-taking and taking control of her life is to leave on her vacation without asking her husband for his permission to go. Instead, she leaves him a note on the microwave with a prepared dinner for him to warm up when he arrives home from work in the evening.

Other rites of letting go of their smothering pasts become evident as the story unfolds. Just before they head west on their weekend vacation, Louise takes a Polaroid

⁷ Abrams, 55.

⁸ Kathleen Murphy, "Women in Revolt: Mortal Thoughts and Thelma and Louise," Film Comment, July/August 1991, 29.

photo of the two of them, "freezing their pre-(r)evolutionary images into a fragile square of color film."⁹ Later that evening, with the prospects of freedom on the horizon, they stop at a country-western, roadside bar to see what it is like to be free. Thelma is picked up by Harlan, a local, macho- thinking bar-fly, "who thinks buying a woman a drink entitles him to something more than [a dance] and flirtatious conversation."¹⁰ When he tries to violently rape Thelma in the parking lot, Louise shows up and finds her missing friend being raped. (Though the audience does not know it at this point in the film, Louise had sometime in the past been raped in Texas.) Therefore, when she sees Thelma being raped, she flies into a fit of rage that has been triggered by the traumatic memory of her own rape. Without thinking, Louise reaches into her purse and pulls out Thelma's gun (that she had packed earlier for self-protection), shoots Harlan, and kills him dead in the parking lot. Murphy says this is Louise's "first irreversible step out of community into wilderness."¹¹

As the two women flee in Louise's convertible, they decide not to telephone the police to report what happened because, as they agree, the police would not believe their

⁹ Murphy, 28.

¹⁰ Richard Schickel, "A Postcard from the Edge," Time, 27 May 1991, 64.

¹¹ Murphy, 29.

story since, as women who live in a male-dominated world, they would probably not receive a fair trial, especially where rape is involved. The audience is unaware, at this point in the film, that this is the first in a reckless series of events that catapults Thelma and Louise closer to a discovery of themselves as persons of worth apart from their daily dull routines, unfulfilling relationships, and lack of meaning in their lives. Cinematographer Adrian Biddle creates lingering shots of the two women to show the audience "what they look like in every kind of light and every kind of mood."¹² This helps us, the movie-watchers, get to know Thelma and Louise on a more intimate basis so we can see, understand and celebrate the changes that come in their lives.

As the story picks up momentum, these fugitive friends commit spontaneous crimes or acts of self-liberation. When Thelma is seduced by a young, charming, hitchhiker/con-artist who robs the two of them of all their money, she is devastated. After their money is stolen, Thelma tries her luck at robbing a general convenience store with the gun she brought with her for protection on their trip. She is made stronger by these two experiences and is able to overcome these violations to her sense of self. In fact, it is at this point that she takes over Louise's role of being

¹² Terrence Rafferty, "Outlaw Princesses," New Yorker, 3 June 1991, 87.

protector and provider in their relationship. Later, in a scene of revelation, Thelma confides a new insight to Louise, "I think I've found my calling. Something's crossed over in me. I can't go back--I just couldn't live."¹³

When Louise gets pulled over in her car to the shoulder of the highway by a highway patrolman for speeding at 110 miles per hour, she and Thelma get very nervous about getting caught for their other crimes. Thus, Thelma decides to take control of the situation and pulls her gun on the patrolman. By tying him up and locking him in the trunk of the patrol car, they are able to buy themselves some time in order to keep from being caught by the police. Three co-movie reviewers write that as Thelma and Louise cut their ties with the past and go on a crime spree, "they grow stronger, tougher and funnier with every mile they drive."¹⁴

During their search for personal freedom, Thelma and Louise are "treated as public property by a leering, slobbering truck driver."¹⁵ This angers them so they spontaneously take revenge on him (and all men like him) by blowing up his semi-truck. They drive away from the scene of the burning truck while watching him scream at them in his rage over what they have done to his truck and over how

¹³ See Scott.

¹⁴ Laura Shapiro with Andrew Murr and Karen Springer, "Women Who Kill Too Much," Newsweek, 17 June 1991, 63.

¹⁵ Shapiro et al., 63.

he has been treated. This event visually depicts another risk Thelma and Louise have taken in order to own and define the space in which they move.¹⁶

Another rite of letting go takes place when Thelma hangs up Louise's phone call to the sympathetic cop-confessor. This spontaneous ritual "breaks her friend's [Louise's] last connection with the old world."¹⁷ By the end of the film, their illusions about life are unmasked and the two of them are ready and willing to die for their freedom because, in Thelma's earlier words, they just "can't go back" to life the way it was "and live."

Places in the Heart¹⁸

In the film Places in the Heart, writer-director, Robert Benton, returns to his native roots in the rural, Texas town of Waxahachie during the Great Depression (1935) to tell the tale of a helpless widow, Edna (Sally Field). She has been brought up--or groomed--as a Southern woman whose life is lived through her husband and children, and she acts out her role in society as a subordinate, second-class woman and wife. After her sheriff-husband, Royce, is shot and killed by a stray bullet from the gun of

¹⁶ Murphy, 29.

¹⁷ Shapiro et al., 63.

¹⁸ Robert Benton, dir., Places in the Heart, with Sally Field, Lindsey Crouse, Ed Harris, Amy Madigan, John Malkovich, and Danny Glover, Tri-Star Pictures, 1984.

a young, drunk, black boy, she (with a strong Southern accent), asks her sister Margaret (Lindsay Crouse):

What's gonna happen to us? I can't support this family. I haven't the least idea how to go about it. It seems like I haven't done anything all my life except raise the kids and keep this house. Royce paid all the bills. I never even knew how much salary he made.¹⁹

As the movie progresses, the audience gets better acquainted with Edna and learns that she is very dependent on many of the men in her life. In one scene, when the bank is about to foreclose on her home and land, Mr. Denby, the banker, advises her to consider selling the land and splitting up her family. Even though she normally would have followed the male-authoritarian advice of Mr. Denby, Edna nevertheless rejects his advice because she does not want to be separated from her children.

A few days later, she does not allow Mr. Denby to intimidate her when she goes to the bank and asks him to show her how to write her first check. During their brief discussion, he tells her she is ignorant. On another occasion, he unexpectedly drops in on her, bringing his blind brother-in-law Will with him. He manipulates her into taking on Will as a boarder "who could pay rent and help her out" because he knows the bank "would sure take it as a sign" that she was "doing something to provide for (her) family." When her son, Frank, is caught smoking at school

¹⁹ See Benton.

and is sent home, she depends on him to tell her "what his Paw would do (about discipline) if he were there."

Throughout most of the motion picture, Edna leans on, trusts, and depends on Moses (Danny Glover)--an itinerant, unemployed, black sharecropper--to help her farm her land, bring in her cotton crop and teach her how to manage her finances. With the unexpected death of her husband, she is suddenly forced to compete in a male-dominated world. Thus, in order to survive the crisis and keep her family together, she has no choice but to depend on the men in her life.

Not long after her husband is buried, Edna becomes transparent in her emerging realization that she has lived most of her life through her husband's and children's lives. She has become sacrificial in her actions toward others, to the exclusion of self. Soon it begins to dawn on her that she must live life differently from the way she has lived it in the past. Therefore, she begins to take life into her own hands, and with self-confidence, to make her own choices and decisions because she has nothing to lose and all to gain. As she fights and struggles desperately to keep her farm and her children, few people in the town lend her a helping hand. Using a form of blackmail, the bank manager dumps Mr. Will on her. When the cotton traders and merchants also try to cheat her, Moze steps in and attempts to prevent it. Later, because of Moze's action as a black man on behalf of a white woman, the Klan disguise themselves

in their Klan robes, go after him, and subsequently threaten Mr. Will when he rushes to the aid of Mozes.²⁰

When a destructive tornado hits Waxahachie, her home and her land, it terrorizes everyone living there. Edna uses every ounce of stamina and energy to save her son and daughter (Frank, Jr. and Possum), her extended family (Moze and Mr. Will), and her farm animals. She makes a choice in this scene to take control of her life and not to give up or give in to the devastation, heartaches, loneliness, disappointments, or pain. In his own artistic way, cinematographer Nestor Almendros' utilizes the lens of the camera to show Edna's unwavering, uncompromising love for life. He vividly captures on film her makeshift family of five as they work together to fight courageously against the ravaging, unpredictable storm in an effort to save each other from harm. By this time in the film Edna has come a long way in undomesticating her servant role.

In the latter section of the movie, we see the price Edna has to pay for the choice she made to keep her farm and her family together. As she picks cotton, we vicariously experience the pain she feels in her body from bending over all day. We feel her agony when she has no energy or willpower left to get out of bed each morning. We feel the aches in her muscles, and the pain in the joints of her

²⁰ Pauline Kael, review of Places in the Heart, New Yorker, 15 October 1984, 173.

hands and fingers that are wrapped because of the agonizing pricks from the thorns of the cotton plants. And, we sweat with her as she sweats from the sweltering heat of the sun's rays on her body while she works in the field hour after hour, day after day. But we also see the look of bewilderment and disbelief on her face and hear the excitement in her voice when she negotiates a surprisingly good deal for the sale of her cotton with the cotton gin owner.

When the Klan has stripped Moze of his personhood, Edna looks beyond herself and her own needs and tries to give Moze back some of his self-worth as he leaves the farm for good. Trying to hold back her emotions, she sensitively expresses her affection and respect for Moze and says to him,

Moze, you took a no account piece of land and a bunch of people who didn't know what they were doin' and you farmed that land better than anybody could--colored or white. You're the one that brought in that first bale of cotton this year. Don't you forget that!²¹

As she finishes her tribute to Moze, the camera moves from Edna's face to focus on the face of an emotionally, psychologically broken, beaten-up Moze. He reflects for a moment on Edna's words and then responds to her, "Yes, ma'am, I reckon I did."²²

²¹ See Benton.

²² See Benton.

Fried Green Tomatoes²³

Director Jon Avnet makes his feature-film debut with Fried Green Tomatoes. Two of the film's leading characters are Evelyn Couch (Kathy Bates) and Ninny Threadgoode (Jessica Tandy). Ninny's and Evelyn's lives intersect when Evelyn comes to visit a relative at the nursing home where 82-year old Ninny lives. They become friends during one of Evelyn's visits, and Ninny "enthralls her with wonderful tales from her Southern, home town of Whistle Stop, Alabama."²⁴ The telling of the tale is "interrupted by long flashbacks to dramatize what [Ninny] narrates. . . ."²⁵ It is done with such "seductive naivete" that the viewer is easily drawn into the film.²⁶

These flashbacks (which take place 50 years after their occurrence) tell the story about two young women, Idgie (Mary Stuart Masterson) and Ruth (Mary-Louise Parker). They develop an intimate relationship, and together (in the 1930s) they open up and run the Whistle Stop Cafe in a community settled around a train depot. One of the unique

²³ Jon Avnet, dir., Fried Green Tomatoes, with Kathy Bates, Jessica Tandy, Mary-Louise Parker, and Mary Stuart Masterson, Universal City Studios, 1992.

²⁴ Roald Rynning, "Frying Tonight," Film Review, March 1992, 51.

²⁵ Stanley Kauffmann, "Stanley Kauffmann on Films," New Republic, 24 February 1992, 28.

²⁶ See Kaufmann, 28.

Southern dishes they serve their customers is fried green tomatoes.

Evelyn is stereotypically portrayed as an "overweight frump with no life of her own."²⁷ During one of her visits with Mrs. Threadgoode, she becomes overwrought and emotional about her life and says, "Mrs. Threadgoode, I am too young to be old and I am too old to be young."²⁸ In an interview, Kathy Bates says of her character Evelyn: She "was brought up to behave in a certain way or be thought of as a tramp . . . [and after a while she] suddenly realizes that you don't get an award for being good and having manners."²⁹ Her husband Ed, according to Evelyn, spends more time sitting on his butt drinking beer and watching sports on television than he does with her. At the suggestion of Ninny she ventures into self-employment as a Mary Kay cosmetics' salesperson. She attends workshops and exercise classes to help her find her real self, understand her sexuality, and find a way to save her marriage.³⁰

Through the inspiring and self-motivating stories that Ninny tells her about Idgie, Edna finds a new self-confidence and vows that she will no longer allow Ed to

²⁷ James Cameron-Wilson, review of Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe, Film Review, March 1992, 36.

²⁸ See Avnet.

²⁹ Rynning, 51.

³⁰ See Cameron-Wilson, 36.

be in charge of her life. In fact, with Ninny's help she is able to unmask her illusions about herself and to begin to love herself and feel like a person of worth. Ninny motivates Evelyn to make changes in her life by helping her make connections between her story and Idgie's and Ruth's stories. Eventually, these connections also become the catalysts for showing Evelyn what is or can be meaningful in her life.

For example, Ruth, the young, beautiful, thin, prim-and-proper, Southern woman in Ninny's flashback, like Evelyn, has been brought up to behave in a certain way. She has fashioned and formed her life around the expectations of others. One evening after a surprise birthday party for her, Idgie is honest with Ruth, reminding her that she (Ruth) has worked hard most of her life always trying to do the right thing. She says, "When your daddy, the preacher, took sick, you took care of him. When the kids at the church school needed a teacher, you volunteered to take care of them. When your daddy died, you took care of your momma." And Ruth then chimes in with, "and now that I am old enough to marry, I'm gonna marry the man I am supposed to marry."³¹

Eventually, after her mother dies, Ruth becomes pregnant and decides to leave her husband, Frank. She could not handle any more beatings from him, especially since they

³¹ See Avnet.

could be endangering, and possibly life-threatening, to her unborn child. Therefore, she sends a symbolic message to Idgie indicating that she wants to come and live with her. The message comes in the form of an obituary from the newspaper listing her (Ruth's) mother's death along with an underlined scripture reference from the book of Ruth which reads, "whither thou goest I will go, and whither thou lodgest I will lodge; your people will be my people, and your God my God."³²

One evening after Ruth moves in with Idgie, when she fears for her safety and that of her son, she tells Idgie that, after Frank would beat her, she remembered

thankin' the Lord for givin' me the strength to take it. I remembered thankin' the Lord for each day that my momma lived, even when she was spittin' up blood and prayin', beggin' for me to kill her. I looked in my mother's eyes pleadin' for me to help her, and all I could do was pray.³³

It is the character of Idgie (in the flashback) whose deep love for Ruth gives Ruth a reason to love herself and the courage to risk leaving her abusive husband, Frank. As Ruth rides in the car away from her home and Frank, and travels down the road to a new life with Idgie, she ceremonially and nonchalantly slips her wedding ring off her finger and flippantly tosses it off to the side of the road, as if to say goodbye forever to her past.

³² See Avnet.

³³ See Avnet.

As Idgie and Ruth run the Whistle Stop Cafe (as co-owners) and become good friends, Idgie helps Ruth to distinguish between her illusions about herself and her life. For example, one evening Idgie convinces Ruth to climb aboard the box car of a freight train. Later, while the train is moving, she expects Ruth to help her throw canned food to the homeless, unemployed people living in the camps alongside the railroad tracks. When Ruth sees the faces of the people and looks into the eyes of the children running alongside the train, holding out their hands for food, she is torn between her compassion to help them and her moral principles that tell her it is wrong to give away food that is not hers to give. However, Idgie makes a strong case for her actions by comparing what she is doing with the hypocritical actions of some of the people who go to church in Whistle Stop. Ruth succumbs to Idgie's definition of truth and throws the canned food off the train to the homeless campers. Thus, it is through Idgie's love, example, and continual questioning of her values, that Ruth decides, to take courageous risks to let go of her past and stake a claim on her future.

According to one film critic, it is the character of Idgie "who holds the movie together."³⁴ Her personality shines through the eyes and the tales of Ninny who relishes

³⁴ Cameron-Wilson, 36.

a "time of spirit and warmth long gone."³⁵ It seems that all the characters in the movie are drawn to Idgie who is pictured as a woman ahead of her time. She is courageous as she fights against "the conventional mores of her neighbors."³⁶ This tough, young heroine has a free spirit that guides her as she bucks the racial and societal attitudes and the oppressive status quo.³⁷ Idgie loves life and people, and immerses herself into both. From the time she was a small child she could do nothing less than be her own person which seemed to always get her in trouble or cause her much grief. Nevertheless, she refused to give in to the system and people's expectations of her.

When Idgie's brother and best friend, Buddy, is killed by a train, she is devastated and life loses all meaning for her. In a last attempt to help Idgie overcome her grief and get on with living, her mother invites Ruth, Buddy's former girlfriend, to come and live with them through the summer. Ruth perseveres in her insistence that Idgie give her the chance to spend time with her and become friends. Eventually they become best friends. Later in the story, it is Ruth's deep love and friendship for Idgie that leads her

³⁵ Cameron-Wilson, 36.

³⁶ Janet Maslin, "Get Out Your Handkerchiefs," New York Times, 23 February 1992, 18.

³⁷ Maslin, 18.

to convince the preacher, Rev. Herbert Scroggins, to lie on Idgie's behalf when she is on trial for murder.

Clearly, it is through the intimate relationship between Ruth and Idgie that Ruth is empowered to take risks in life for the sake of herself, and later, toward the end of her life, to face her terminal cancer with courage. She tells "Aunt" Idgie that she wants her to raise her son, Buddy, Jr., after her death. On the last day of her life, the audience is privy to an intimate moment on the screen as we watch Idgie in a heart-to-heart conversation with Buddy, Jr. about his momma's illness. She affectionately reminds him that, since his momma is sick, he must be courageous. As she tries to comfort him and find words to express her feelings, she tells him that his momma is an angel masquerading as a person walking around on this planet.

By the end of the feature-film, Evelyn understands better the realities and limitations of servanthood and sacrifice because of Ninny's unconditional love for her. When Ninny leaves the nursing home and returns to her home in Whistle Stop, Evelyn finds her sitting on her suitcase in front of the vacant land where her house used to be. No one had had the heart to tell Ninny, while she was in the nursing home, that her house had been condemned and consequently torn down.

In her anguish and trauma upon seeing the vacant lot with no house on it, upon Evelyn's arrival, Ninny says to

her, "You don't reckon I'm crazy do you? Somebody stole my house. I'm old. I'm not a child. Someone should have told me. . . . Eighty-three years worth of livin' and all that's left of me is in this box. It's the first time I can remember I don't have a soul to look after."³⁸ Evelyn then responds to Ninny's despair, saying, "Mrs. Threadgoode, you're the reason I get up every morning and you're the reason that I don't look like a blob. I love you and I want you to come live with me and Ed."³⁹

As evidenced clearly in Thelma and Louise, in Places in the Heart, and in Fried Green Tomatoes, Thelma, Louise, Edna, Evelyn, and Ruth have distorted visions of reality. Each of them sooner or later learns that serving others at the expense of personhood is too high a price to pay. Each film purposely attempts to confront the validity or value of this kind of wrongly perceived servanthood, "giving the culture [movie audience] a way of looking at itself, articulating its ideologies, reflecting and creating its physical appearance and gestures, teaching and confirming its shared myths."⁴⁰ In the tradition of *film noir*,⁴¹ the

³⁸ See Avnet.

³⁹ See Avnet.

⁴⁰ Robert Phillip Kolker, A Cinema of Loneliness: Penn, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press), 1988, vii.

⁴¹ For a more comprehensive study of the history, interpretations, and implications of *film noir*, see Kolker's bibliography in Cinema of Loneliness, 385.

audience sees "the way the character sees it--not *through* his [or her] eyes, but *with* his [or her] sensibility," thereby permitting both proximity and separation."⁴² In each film the viewer is artistically led to feel with the characters what it is like to be trapped in the dilemma of reconciling the demands of self with those of servanthood. Thus, it is the viewer who must at some point in the film make some sense of the dilemma.

Places Where My Story and Others' Stories Connect

After seeing each of the films discussed above, I realized that they have similarities in the stories of their leading women, and each of their stories has similarities to mine. In their stories I learned how difficult, but important, it is to disengage myself from old frames of reference; to unmask illusions about myself; to break free from unhealthy, dependent relationships; and to have the courage to take risks when they are necessary. I was also reminded of the importance of taking control of my life rather than allowing others or their expectations to control it for me; of the importance of seeing servanthood as a choice rather than a sacrifice; of the importance of resisting and changing oppressive racial and societal attitudes; and of the importance of persevering in the discovery of myself as a person of worth.

⁴² Kolker, 187.

In their stories I was consequently reminded that the context of relationships and community has continually provided me with alternative ways to survive and celebrate within the ambiguous claims on my life. This personal experience parallels those same stories in which certain communities undergirded Edna's, Ruth's, Idgie's, Evelyn's and Ninny's relationships as well. At the end of Fried Green Tomatoes Ninny reminded me of the importance of community. She said, "I never realized how many lives in Whistle Stop had been affected by the lives of Idgie and Ruth. Now that I look back on it, when Ruth died and Idgie closed the cafe, the heart of the town just died. It's funny that a little place like this brought so many people together."⁴³

In Places in the Heart director Benton imaged for me some of the common and uncommon places where individuals and community connect. He helped me to imagine, at various places in the film, what community is like in the way he grouped its citizens: a family said grace at the dinner table; members of the black community sang at a funeral; friends and family members gathered together with food for a wake; the townsfolk (of all ages) danced together at a dance; and Edna's makeshift family showed concern and gave help to each other before, during, and after the destruction of the town by the tornado. On one occasion, "a pair of

⁴³ See Avnet.

guilty lovers . . . betray[ed] themselves to his wife . . . by the way they handle[d] a deck of cards in a rummy game."⁴⁴ In the final scene Benton celebrated a quality of human spirit within the community that transcended earlier events of heartbreak and catastrophe. Thus, as the film concludes, the audience is shown how relationships in the context of community can serve as catalysts for bringing about transformation in people's lives.

As we look back at the powerful stories of the film's leading women, we can see that each of their lives were transformed. Each of them moved light years from her negative self-image at the beginning of the film to a more positive self-image by the end of the film. The self of each woman's character was brought back to life through experiences of radical love--a kind of love that binds people together.

Beverly Wildung Harrison puts it this way. She says, "[M]utual love . . . is love in its deepest radicality To experience it, we must be open, we must be capable of giving and receiving."⁴⁵ There must be a rhythm of empowering love where there is an equality between

⁴⁴ Schickel, 71.

⁴⁵ Beverly Wildung Harrison, "Sexism and the Language of Christian Ethics," in Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics, ed. Carol S. Robb (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 222.

partners, of take and give, give and take.⁴⁶ Radical acts of love are those that express human solidarity and bring mutual relationship to life. According to Harrison, these are the central virtues of the Christian moral life. They are the real reasons for Jesus' sacrifice on the cross.⁴⁷ In fact, writes C. K. Barrett, Jesus was so radical in his love that "before any of the disciples could lay down his life for another, Christ had laid down his life for them all."⁴⁸

This is the kind of radical love I hope college chaplains can exemplify in their roles of meaning-maker and community-builder on campus--one that is mutual, reciprocal, and empowering. However, it is also my hope that chaplains will recognize from the films, and within their own experiences, that they must first be "brought to stand before the naked mystery of my [their] own being."⁴⁹ Sue Monk Kidd tells the story about a time when she was feeling suffocated because she had been wearing the masks of false selves and had cut herself off from her True Self. She travelled to a Dominican retreat center to try and remember who she really was. When she walked in the front door, a

⁴⁶ Beverly Harrison, 222.

⁴⁷ Beverly Harrison, 223.

⁴⁸ C. K. Barrett, "John," Peake's Commentary on the Bible, ed. Matthew Black (London: Thomas Nelson, 1962), 861.

⁴⁹ Sue Monk Kidd, "Birthing Compassion," Weavings 5, no. 6 (1990): 26.

picture of the pregnant Madonna was tacked on the wall with these words:

This image represents each person who is trying to birth the Real Self, the Imago Dei that is taking shape within. For that conception to move to its fullness, we all need time to be quiet, to be reflective, to be centered in our deep places.⁵⁰

Through the medium of film, and many other resources, chaplains can experience and help their students to experience the connective power of story and its contribution to meaning making in their lives. Put in another way, when my story connects with another's story, the first barrier in a relationship is overcome. This is extremely important for chaplains to recognize when working in a multicultural context.

⁵⁰ Kidd, "Birthing Compassion," 27.

CHAPTER 4

Discovering Myself in a Context of Community:

Connecting My Story with the Jesus Story

One of the serendipities of waxing autobiographically is the discovery of just how quickly others come into view. The very notion of telling one's story refers implicitly to some form of community, some other or others to whom (or for whom) the story is told. For college students, one of the most important places where they can discover and make meaning out of their lives is in the context of a religious or spiritual community. When this happens, autobiography becomes other-directional, and it presupposes and includes others. Its trajectory is toward community.

At the same time, community is never an unmixed blessing. The groups and institutions which liberate us from solipsism--a belief that nothing exists but the self--provide us with language, symbols, perspective, reference groups, and sociality, but these same groups also limit us. The language that we learn to write is unintelligible to those beyond its pale. Our system of symbols is attached to events and traditions which are not universal. Our perspective, while allowing us to make the world make sense to us, is nevertheless incapable of embracing all of reality. Our reference group may be composed of the most wonderful people we know, but its shaping influence on us can also misshape us. Our sociality is destined for

parochialism unless there is intervention that leads in the direction of a larger social existence.

Accordingly, autobiography is more than story, even more than meaning making. It also implies and includes some community, both for good and for ill. In my case this has meant socialization within, and a coming to terms with, that ubiquitous institution we call the church. My story is both intertwined with, and told over against, the community of Christian faith--in particular, those persons within and among whom I have most often found community, the Baptists.

The Jesus Story as a Question

At the heart of the Christian community is a story I am calling the Jesus Story--a story that remains central to what it means to be Christian. In light of the importance of this story, as it relates to different developmental periods in my life, this chapter has been structured and framed around a specific question that comes from the life of Jesus. Since the Jesus Story is, and has been, central in my life as a Christian, I have found that I must bring my story into some kind of connection with it. The question posed by that story will serve as a bridge for showing how my story is connected to this story so central to my own community of faith, and consequently will serve as a catalyst for making similar connections for the reader. As articulated by Jesus to his disciples in the gospel of Mark, the question is:

Jesus and his disciples set out for the villages of Caesarea Philippi, and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say I am?" They answered, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, others one of the prophets." "And you," he asked, "Who do you say I am?" (Mark 8:27-29a)

My Answer as a Young Child

As a young child, the church taught me my first concepts about who Jesus was. I learned that Jesus loved me, he loved little children, and he loved all the children of the world. Even though as children we were weak, we were taught through songs, stories, and Bible verses that Jesus loved us, and we were special to him. In fact, as early as age four, I can remember attending Sunday School, worship, and Training Union every Sunday, and Vacation Bible School in the summer, at First Baptist Church, Pampa, Texas.

Jesus was the theological center of everything I learned. I heard stories about how he cared for animals, obeyed and loved his parents, and made friends to whom he was loyal. I looked forward to the stories teachers would tell about Jesus' healing people who were sick, about his enjoyment of friends, especially at meal times, about how he was a human being with emotions just like me, and about how he was compassionate toward persons of all ages and differences.

Being a visual person, my earliest recollection of a picture of Jesus was one where either children or sheep were gathered around him. Some artists' renderings depicted Mary and Joseph hovering over Jesus in his manger after his birth

while the shepherds and three wise men from faraway places stared at him. Another picture showed Jesus standing beside Joseph while they did carpentry work. Some photographs of paintings portrayed Jesus as a young boy talking with the priests and doctors of the law in the Temple; praying in the Garden of Gethsemane while the disciples slept nearby; and dying on a cross to which he was nailed, while women who loved him huddled together and shared their grief near the foot of the cross.

Those images and portrayals of Jesus left a positive, vivid impression on me. As I grew older, I was influenced by Christian relatives, church members, school teachers, and other citizens in the community who, as expressed by Jacquelyn Grant about an experience similar to mine, lived out their "theology of somebodiness . . . without pretension" and conveyed to me that Jesus affirmed me.¹ All of this was done "in the name of Jesus."² Also, like Grant, I too made "a personal commitment to Jesus as a youngster [which] was not one that restricted me . . . as a female, but affirmed me and projected me into areas where, I later

¹ Jacquelyn Grant, White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response, AAR Academy Series, no. 64 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), ix.

² Jacquelyn Grant, ix.

learned, 'I was not supposed to go' by virtue of my [denomination, Southern heritage, or] gender."³

My Answer as an Adolescent

During my teen years I experienced ambiguities and confusion in my understanding of who Jesus was in my life. On the one hand, I continued to experience Jesus positively as the incarnation and presence of God in my life who was exemplified through people, events, and stories in the Bible. Yet, on the other hand, as I matured and grew in knowledge, wisdom, and understanding of my faith, my father and the authoritarian religious leaders in my life, began emphasizing the value of a religion motivated by guilt. I was told that if I wanted to be more like Jesus that I must strive to be perfect--one without sin, weaknesses, shortcomings, or flaws.

Sometimes I would be so overwhelmed with feelings of guilt for sins I may have committed during the day that, at night before I went to sleep, I would pray to God--through Jesus--to ask for divine forgiveness. Much of the time I did not have a clue as to what sins I had committed, but I was afraid that if I did not pray for forgiveness, I might die during the night and thus would be eternally damned and go to hell.

I became very confused. I had trouble reconciling a positive childhood understanding of who Jesus was with this

³ Jacquelyn Grant, ix.

newer, contradictory view that emphasized his divinity, while stripping him of his humanity with which I had most closely identified. My theology of somebodyness, therefore, had been replaced with a theology of nobodyness. In other words, though I was taught as a child that I was somebody in the eyes of Jesus from the day I was born, I was now being told to forget all of that because it was no longer the truth. Now I was being told that in order to be a somebody, I had to strive continually to be perfect like Jesus. The only way to do that was to do good deeds and live a life of servanthood in behalf of other people and to the exclusion of self. Yet, since Jesus' life and words had shown me that God the Father was a merciful, forgiving God, then there was a measure of hope for woeful sinners like me who could not attain this impossible ideal, namely a life of continual repentance. It was a non-negotiable requirement, along with doing good deeds and servanthood.

Strict obedience to Jesus Christ, the role model of self-sacrificing love and obedience to God, was emphasized in the church, in our prayers, sermons, and literature. The "Watchword" of the Girls' Auxiliary (a missions' organization in my church), which I had committed to memory, vividly illustrates my point: "Knowing that countless people grope in darkness, I assert my allegiance to Jesus Christ, to his church, and its activities. . . . "

Thus, I spent much of my teenage (and college) years overridden with constant worry or guilt over what I did or did not do for someone else in a given day, or with what I might have done (or left undone) as a good Christian. I became very perplexed. It seems that I was given plenty of guidance from the Bible and religious leaders in authority regarding what I should do. But, there were very few guidelines as to what constituted the right kind or the right amount of works I needed to perform in order to end up in the good graces of a judgmental but forgiving God. I felt that this kind of God had at least two personalities. Sometimes God seemed like a doting grandparent--an indulging authority figure who was an easy touch for all who kept up-to-date and were thorough with their repenting. Yet, other times God seemed to be a vengeful tyrant possessing the maturity of a two-year old with a temper tantrum. Understandably, then, my relationship with Jesus across my teen years became very dysfunctional.

My Answer as a Young Adult

For the next ten years after I graduated from college, I searched for personal answers to the question "Who do you say I am?" I had a low self-esteem and very little self-confidence. Since much of my life had been centered around the church, its mission, its activities, and my own faith commitment, I necessarily looked to the church for guidance, encouragement, challenge, support, love, and community.

During those ten years I was introduced to the women's liberation movement both outside and inside the church. As a woman and as a Christian I experienced my own liberation. The movement gave me "a taste and feel of . . . [my own] spiritual power, and out of this movement has emerged a new language, a new naming of the world. . . . "⁴ and a new appreciation for who Jesus was in my life.

When I felt estranged from my family, something so small as reading the names of the two women mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus in the book of Matthew (chap. 1) gave me a new family to which I could belong. When I experienced overwhelming feelings of guilt as a condemned sinner, I remembered Jesus' forgiveness of various women whose paths crossed his. When I felt unworthy of love or happiness, I reminded myself of Jesus' love exemplified in his behavior for all kinds of people, especially the ones living on the margins. When I was lonely, I thought about the fact that Jesus had bad days too, and when this happened, he sometimes retreated from the crowds or took the time to share in a meal with friends. When I was unsure of my own equality with most men and with some women, I looked at what Jesus had to say in the Bible about authority, servanthood, and relationships. I also looked at some of his experiences and his responses to them.

⁴ Sheila D. Collins, A Different Heaven and Earth (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1974), 43.

Over time I opted to follow Sheila Collins' advice and "slay the patriarchal dragon in myself, the demon that had kept me in bondage to logic, intellectualism, and to masculine expectations and approval."⁵ I learned to accept and act on what I already knew to be true--that Jesus restored "women to full personal dignity in the reign of God and inspiring [inspired] their liberation from structures of domination and subordination."⁶ And, through my "own experience of salvation, own telling of the story, own praxis and prayer,"⁷ I took the first steps toward re-naming and re-claiming Jesus in my own cultural and religious tradition, "so that a living christology will be handed on to the next generation into the twenty-first century."⁸

Furthermore, writes Collins, this kind of action/reflection process tends to pave the way for the participation of many persons who theologize out of their own experiences and eventually give birth to new theologies in their own cultural context.⁹ Though this kind of theologizing can be exciting, challenging, and even adventurous, I am reminded not to forget that theology

⁵ Collins, 10.

⁶ Elizabeth A. Johnson, Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology (New York: Crossroad Publs., 1990), 112.

⁷ Johnson, Consider Jesus, 146.

⁸ Johnson, Consider Jesus, 146.

⁹ Collins, 33.

should never be legislated to God's people by dominating persons in authority or in places of power. I am also reminded that, since christology is the central doctrine in most Christians' theology, then Christians today have the responsibility "to utter their own christological word, personally and collectively as church, so that faith in Jesus Christ may be passed on to the next generation in a truly living state."¹⁰

My Answer as a Seminarian and Young Minister

From 1975 to 1981 I attended a very conservative Southern Baptist seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, and studied for the master of divinity degree. The teaching style of the majority of the professors (male) whom I encountered in the classroom was "characterized by being objective rather than subjective, rational rather than intuitive, linear rather than circular or organic, logical rather than mystical, dissecting rather than unifying, abstract rather than concrete."¹¹ Most of the professors had been hired to teach in a patriarchal institution that functioned within the mindset and framework of "hierarchical 'chains of command' and 'lines of authority.'"¹² Since my ways of learning did not necessarily fit within that kind of framework, I graduated from seminary feeling a sense of loss

¹⁰ Johnson, Consider Jesus, xi.

¹¹ Collins, 51.

¹² Collins, 51.

and a denial of knowledge in several theological areas of needed education.

A hierarchical paradigm, validated and legitimated by scripture, was used to rationalize the pattern of relationships on campus, in the home, in the community, and in the world. Even the words of Paul the apostle were used to corroborate these claims of hierarchy: "But I wish you to understand that, while every man has Christ for his head, a woman's head is man, as Christ's head is God" (1 Cor. 11:3). And: "Wives, be subject to your husbands as though to the Lord; for the man is the head of the woman, just as Christ is the head of the church. Christ is, indeed, the saviour of that body; but just as the church is subject to Christ, so must women be subject to their husbands in everything" (Eph. 5:22-23).

Collins has much to say about this as well: "By analogy, then, man is woman's savior; only by being subject to him in matrimony can woman achieve redemptive grace."¹³ Collins goes on to say that Western man has believed that "by virtue of her ontological place in that order, [woman is] 'naturally' prone to temptation, to the sin of pride, self-will and disobedience."¹⁴ She clarifies further that where sin has been defined in this way, it has, on the one hand, "functioned to keep women submissive, underdeveloped,

¹³ Collins, 67.

¹⁴ Collins, 81.

and perpetually guilty," and, it has, on the other hand, "allowed most men the freedom of self-expression, self-assertion, and the power to dominate and subjugate others."¹⁵

For centuries Western man has claimed that because woman (Eve) tempted man (Adam) in the Garden of Eden, she is, therefore, "the source of all evil for which Christ as Redeemer had to come."¹⁶ Tertullian wrote:

Do you not know that you are [each] an Eve? . . . You are the devil's gateway: you are the unsealer of that forbidden tree: you are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert--that is, death--even the Son of God had to die."¹⁷

Centuries later, at the Southern Baptist Convention in Kansas City, Missouri, June 12-14, 1984, the convention messengers voted 4,793/for and 3,466/against "Resolution No. 3: 'On Women'." The last section of the resolution says that Paul "excludes women from pastoral leadership (1 Tim. 2:12) to preserve a submission God requires because the man

¹⁵ Collins, 81.

¹⁶ Collins, 78.

¹⁷ "On Female Dress," The Writings of Tertullian, vol. 1, in Ante-Nicene Christian Library, vol. 9, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1869), 304-05, quoted in Collins, 78.

was first in creation and the woman was first in the Edenic fall (1 Tim. 2:13ff.). . . . "18

For the reasons given above regarding the subordination of women as legitimated by virtue of her ontological place in the created order, her predeliction to temptation and sin, and the maleness of Jesus Christ, I was warned not to attempt to do certain things in my life as a Southern Baptist, woman, minister, and mother. These warnings, sometimes mandates, came from seminary professors, ministers, church and denominational leaders, fellow seminary students, and some women. They proclaimed that the Bible clearly stated that women should not preach, be ordained, or serve in church leadership positions of authority. Furthermore, they expressed great concern because I was a woman seminary student working on a Master of Divinity degree as well as a working mother outside the home.

In the seminary classroom, I felt invisible because I was not included in many of the lectures or class discussions since I was a woman. Lectures were addressed to "you, men, and your wives," and statements were directed to "you, men, while you are preaching in your churches," Men and single women in the classroom were addressed by

¹⁸ Reba Sloan Cobb and Betty McGary Pearce, eds., "Resolution No. 3: 'On Women.'" Resolution passed at Southern Baptist Convention, Kansas City, Missouri, June 1984, in Folio: A Newsletter for Southern Baptist Women in Ministry 2, no. 2 (1984): 7.

their first names, while I was addressed in some of my classes only by my married name, Mrs. Peak. At my church I was deliberately excluded from participation as a church-elected usher because I was a woman. The ushers on the Usher Committee refused to inform me about meetings or to include me in the Sunday morning or evening responsibilities during worship because no woman had ever served as an usher, and, more specifically, because they believed that ushering in worship was a man's job. In my preaching class I was avoided by or looked down upon by some of the students who believed I should not be in the class because I was a woman.

On other occasions I listened to preachers, teachers, lecturers, and workshop and church leaders as they exhorted me never to forget my place as a woman in the church. They strongly encouraged me to follow Paul's admonition that women should be silent in the church (1 Cor. 14:34-35). When sermons were preached with women as the subject of the sermon, though infrequently, they were preached in praise of women who were good mothers. Whereas, men who were subjects of the sermon were highly praised and exalted because of their faith, intelligence, and wisdom.

This kind of male-dominant theology, though I did not understand its full implications at the time, has been described by Rosemary Reuther as one "that relegates woman

to inferior status in both creation and redemption."¹⁹ It is also the kind of theology that, according to Reuther, has served as "the keystone of the conservative decision to exclude women from church leadership through their arguments against women's ordination."²⁰ Furthermore, clarifies Reuther, the maleness of Christ as the head and the bridegroom of the church has been central to the argument. In other words, since Christ was historically male and only males can be bridegrooms, then this rightly assumes the maleness of God.²¹ Thus, God's disclosure in history has been seen "as a disclosure of a fundamentally male reality in such a way as to exclude women from representing this divine redemptive action."²²

Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Orthodox writings against women's ordination have also included arguments citing that Jesus desired no women to be ordained since he appointed no women disciples. Hence, the maleness of the priest, too, has been linked with the maleness of Christ.²³ In the "Vatical Declaration: Women in the Ministerial Priesthood," it was argued that since the priest represents Christ to the

¹⁹ Rosemary Radford Reuther, To Change the World: Christology and Cultural Criticism (New York: Crossroad Publs., 1981), 45-46.

²⁰ Reuther, 46.

²¹ Reuther, 46.

²² Reuther, 46.

²³ Reuther, 26.

people, then he must bear a "natural resemblance" to Christ in his maleness "for Christ was and remains a man."²⁴ Moreover, says Reuther, Aquinas proposed that maleness was normative and that the male sex represented the wholeness of human nature and the fullness of the image of God. He claimed that woman is a defective human being who is confined to a subservient position in the original social order of things. Therefore, cites Reuther, Aquinas concluded that women could not represent the image of God, and it would logically follow that the incarnation of the Logos/Word of God in the maleness of Jesus was not an accident in history but was ontologically necessary.²⁵ Mary Daly tersely sums up the net effect of Aquinas' theology in her simple but profoundly descriptive, often quoted, statement: "If God is male, then the male is God."²⁶

Even though the above claims and events had a significantly demoralizing effect on my life, I personally did not have problems with the fact that God chose to become incarnate in a male and not in a female form. My belief was that God was no respecter of persons because I experienced God's grace as universal. Through a variety of experiences

²⁴ "Vatival Declaration: Women in the Ministerial Priesthood," Origins 6 (1977): 522.

²⁵ Reuther, 45.

²⁶ Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 19.

I came to understand, as Pamela Dickey Young makes clear, that

[i]t is human social structures and not God's choice that makes the appearance of a male savior more likely. . . . God chose Jesus as God could choose many other events that are fitting representations of God's grace. . . . [Thus,] [t]he maleness of Jesus does not automatically exclude him from being able to re-present God's grace to women.²⁷

Furthermore, I came to believe that the maleness of Jesus and the incarnation of God in Jesus did not automatically exclude or deny the revelation or incarnation of God in any form other than Jesus Christ.

Jacquelyn Grant writes that implicit in "the Christological, the historical, the psychological, the secular, and the ecclesiastical arguments against women" is the question of who or what Jesus was.²⁸ She agrees with Jarena Lee and Sojourner Truth that

the significance of Christ is not his maleness, but his humanity. The most significant events of Jesus Christ were the life and ministry, the crucifixion, and the resurrection. The significance of these events, in one sense, is that in them the absolute becomes concrete. God becomes concrete not only in the man Jesus, for he was crucified, but in the lives of those who will accept the challenges of the risen Saviour the Christ.

For Lee, this meant that women could preach; for Sojourner, it meant that women could possibly save the world; for me [Grant], it means today, this

²⁷ Pamela Dickey Young, Feminist Theology/Christian Theology: In Search of Method (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 99.

²⁸ Jacquelyn Grant, 76.

Christ, found in the experiences of Black women, is a Black woman.²⁹

And, for me (Ashli), it continues to mean that this Christ might be found in an African-American woman, a woman preacher or carpenter, a Chinese mother, a United States Congresswoman, a widowed Latino school teacher, an unemployed community volunteer who is single, or my grandmother. This Christ, for me, would be found identifying universally with the victims of racism, sexism, ageism, and classism, and with the poor, the woman, and the stranger, affirming the humanity of the marginalized, and giving hope and inspiring action toward liberation from inhumanity and injustice.

Theologian and religious educator, Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, adds her insights to the discussion, pointing out that "the revelation of Jesus Christ offers a vision that helps to interpret and judge other revelations. . . . that will pull us toward something better."³⁰ Process theologian Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki agrees and affirms Moore's view as she claims that the life of Jesus Christ "offers a concrete vision of the reality to which God calls us" and "reveals the nature of God for us."³¹ Moore

²⁹ Jacquelyn Grant, 220.

³⁰ Moore, 107.

³¹ Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, God, Christ, Church: A Practical Guide to Process Theology, rev. ed. (New York: Crossroad Pubs., 1989), 101.

elaborates further: "If we take the process [theology] view of incarnation seriously, . . . we are faced with the idea that the smallest element of reality can reveal God. Everything is holy, so we listen for the word of God in all that is."³² Specifically, "God and the world are incarnate in each individual, and each individual is incarnate in God and the world."³³

My Answer as a Maturing Adult

For quite a few years of my life now I have tried to find palpable, credible answers to the question of who Jesus was in terms of his own knowledge of things and of himself. I have found myself needing and wanting to understand how Jesus could be Godself on earth who is genuinely human and yet completely divine. I have wondered how Jesus could be genuinely human if he knew he was God. And, if he did not know his identity, then how could he be God since God knows everything?

Elizabeth A. Johnson, in her writing on Jesus' self-knowledge, has exposed some very helpful insights related to my questions. She points out how the scriptures show Jesus as knowing a great deal; yet, they also show that he was limited in his knowledge in certain ways as a human being.³⁴ She illustrates this viewpoint by citing a key verse as one

³² Moore, 109-10.

³³ Moore, 110.

³⁴ Johnson, Consider Jesus, 4-5.

of several examples used by scholars to substantiate the claim: Jesus says, "Yet about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, not even the Son, no one but the Father" (Mark 13:32). Johnson explains further that there have been many debates as far back as the patristic period that centered around the issue of whether or not Jesus' knowledge was limited.³⁵

Johnson bases the bulk of her discussion in this chapter on a theological proposal by Karl Rahner which seems to be consistent with christology as it has developed in the last decades.³⁶ The proposal looks at our self-knowledge and then applies it to Jesus. She summarizes by saying that there are different levels of knowing and not knowing ourselves. "Subjectively, we know ourselves from within intuitively as the person we are."³⁷ She states that it is a kind of presence to and self-awareness of ourselves that informs and undergirds all of our actions and thoughts. Objectively, we know ourselves in words and concepts that we can explain to others in precise and concrete ways.³⁸ Our knowledge of ourselves thus has a bipolar structure.³⁹

³⁵ Johnson, Consider Jesus, 36-38.

³⁶ Johnson, Consider Jesus, 38-45.

³⁷ Johnson, Consider Jesus, 39.

³⁸ Johnson, Consider Jesus, 39.

³⁹ Johnson, Consider Jesus, 41.

Jesus' self-consciousness was also structured in this bi-polar way. Johnson writes that each day Jesus "comes into consciousness with an intuitive personal grasp" of who he is as the Word made flesh.⁴⁰ However, "[a]s with all of us, the mystery of his person was never totally expressed in concrete terms up until the time of his death, when he transcends the world and is raised from the dead. Then his ultimate identity burst upon him in all clarity."⁴¹ This does not deny the fact that Jesus had a sense of who he was in terms of his own mission, authority, and strong sense of self, as "utterly related to God."⁴² Yet, up until the end of his life he still had choices to make since he did not have a full concrete grasp of everything there was to know about himself. "For this," Johnson concludes, "it would take the resurrection."⁴³

Johnson ends her discussion with an important point which I have reserved for further (future) reflection. She asks the question: "Do we really believe that God has loved us so much as to identify with everything in our human life including ignorance?"⁴⁴ This is followed by her thought-

⁴⁰ Johnson, Consider Jesus, 41.

⁴¹ Johnson, Consider Jesus, 42.

⁴² Johnson, Consider Jesus, 43-44.

⁴³ Johnson, Consider Jesus, 45.

⁴⁴ Johnson, Consider Jesus, 47.

provoking answer: If we believe this, then "we are glimpsing the depths of God's self-emptying in the incarnation."⁴⁵

Emerging Questions Regarding Jesus
and Other Religions

In addition to questions regarding the nature and mission of Jesus Christ, over time I have built up a reserve of quite a few questions related to religious pluralism. Ever since I worked and served professionally as a college chaplain, I have tried to understand and define Christian uniqueness in the kind of world in which we live today. Does it mean that, if I claim to be a Christian and am totally committed to that tradition, I must also accept the claim that Christianity is superior to other religions? Does it mean that Jesus Christ is the only truth and way to follow, the only one to whom I must give my allegiance? Does it mean that I must accept a hierarchy of religious traditions, putting Christianity at the top? If so, what are the implications regarding salvation for those persons who are not Christian? What does this mean to the Christian who believes in a God who desires salvation of all persons?⁴⁶ Would there be room for dialogue at all among the major religions of today? By what criteria do we decide what is truth? Is there a universal religion, with a common

⁴⁵ Johnson, Consider Jesus, 47.

⁴⁶ See Gavin D'Costa, Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 4.

denominator among certain religions, with a Christ or savior figure represented in each? If there is, then what do we as Christians do with our mission efforts and Christianity's claim to absoluteness.⁴⁷ How can I claim with integrity the validity, credibility, and truth of Christianity?

I am indebted to John Cobb for his discussion on religious pluralism in the book, Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions. In it Cobb states emphatically that Christianity is unique but that Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, and Judaism are also unique because radical pluralism assumes this to be true.⁴⁸ He adds that "the uniqueness of each includes a superiority, namely, the ability to achieve what by its own historic norms is most important."⁴⁹

Clearly, he gives new meaning to the word superiority. He explains that Christian superiority does not mean that Christians or Christian institutions are better than others or that historically Christianity has made more of a positive contribution to the world than have other traditions.⁵⁰ Rather, a Christ-centered tradition, in

⁴⁷ D'Costa, 4.

⁴⁸ See John Cobb, "Beyond 'Pluralism,'" in Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), 91-92.

⁴⁹ Cobb, 92.

⁵⁰ Cobb, 92.

principle, says Cobb, has "no need for exclusive boundaries, . . . it can be open to transformation by what it learns from others . . . [and] it can move forward to become a community of faith informed by the whole of human history "51

Taking this a step further, Cobb writes that no tradition's central claims can be literally or exactly correct; and to debate or argue these claims is not necessary. For example, in the name of Jesus Christ, Christians have made their own beliefs normative for all and they have closed themselves off from criticism and new insight.⁵² However, Cobb reiterates that people in each tradition can learn from other traditions what is most important to those traditions without giving up their own significant, central concerns.⁵³ He also reminds the reader that, in various times in history, many religious traditions have borrowed insights and rituals from one another and appropriated them according to their own tradition. For example, Roman Catholics have adapted within their religious traditions many of the meditational methods of the East. Cobb remarks that no religious tradition then is ever pure and that each has much to learn from the other. He states further that, in the future, the Christianity that emerges

⁵¹ Cobb, 93.

⁵² Cobb, 93.

⁵³ Cobb, 93.

from interreligious dialogue will be different from anything known before, but it will be no less Christian.

Cobb concludes his discussion announcing in good faith his belief that Christianity is unique, like all traditions are unique. He says Christianity's role in history and its response to our pluralistic situation are also unique. And, the fact that Christianity has the potential for becoming more inclusive is unique as well.⁵⁴

What Cobb says here is important as it pertains to the role of the college chaplain. Chaplains must be able to claim the uniqueness of and their commitment to their own faith tradition, while, at the same time, not allowing their tradition to limit them from being inclusive of other religious traditions in a pluralistic setting. Finding a balance in one's commitments is not always easy to do. This is where story comes in.

College chaplains can utilize their understanding and experiences of the central story (or stories) of their faith to guide them in their work with students on a multicultural, multifaith campus. The sharing of their story (or of students' stories) can help other students better understand what having a faith really means. Sharing stories can also help students make connections in their lives that were not readily apparent to them before. Sometimes sharing stories can give students a perspective on

⁵⁴ Cobb, 94.

incarnation or salvation that provides them with hope. Other times the sharing of stories can reveal the importance of the students' faith journeys, of their quest for meaning and truth, of being able to ask questions without condemnation or judgment, of the role conflict can play in crossing barriers, and of "the spiritual forces that have shaped or failed to shape the lives of peoples, the mores and ethos of societies."⁵⁵

In conclusion, any story-centered faith tradition, in principle, has no need for exclusive boundaries. It can be open to transformation by what it learns from others, and, importantly, the tradition can move forward so that the community can be informed by the whole of human history and by the living stories of the present community of students. In this way, autobiography becomes more than story and more than meaning making. It becomes a pathway to the Divine.

⁵⁵ Song, Theology from the Womb of Asia, 152.

CHAPTER 5

Locating Myself in the Context of a Theological World:

Reframing My Story within the Church's Story

Self-evidently, there is more to the church's story than what I have called the Jesus Story. Much of that "more" is the long history of *fides quarens intellectum*--faith searching for understanding. It is the collective attempt of the Christian community over two millenia to become critically and conceptually reflective and self-reflective. That history is also part of the church's story.

Over the last few decades this collective effort has become drastically complexified and diversified. As growing numbers of communities within the church community have become loci for doing and validating theology, old hegemonies of thought, method, and practice have been supplanted and superceded by pluralism. Accordingly, as I have told my own story, I have had to come to terms with a rapidly developing, growing, flourishing polyphony of stories,¹ each bidding for recognition as a bona fide aspect of the church's story, or for acknowledgment as an equally valid perspective on that story.

¹ The definition given for polyphony is appropriate in this context: a "multiplicity of sounds, as in an echo; . . . a combining of a number of independent but harmonizing melodies; [and] the representation of two or more sounds by the same letter, symbol, or group of symbols." "Polyphony," Webster's New World Dictionary of American English, 3rd college ed.

In all candor, viewed from a strictly personal standpoint, I would prefer to defer, even circumvent this task of relating with the complex whole. Yet, as a college chaplain, I feel that I have no choice but to come to terms with the realities and complexities of the Christian community's institutional life if I am to be able effectively to facilitate students' efforts in coming to terms with their own religious communities.

The broadening and deepening diversity I have described above reminds me that Christian theology is rapidly becoming a plural noun as well as a singular one, much like the word deer. For even when attempting to embrace the whole of it, one must concede that the whole is actually a many. Correspondingly, I have found that, in order to express my story as part of the church's story, I must do so from the vantage point of my particularity and historicity. Moreover, my experience of *fides quarens intellectum* raises the issue which has been highly influential and decisive for my formation, both as a Christian and as a woman--the issue of religious authority. Thus, in this chapter I will reframe my story within the church's story.

The first section will begin with a working definition of local theology. Second, I will explore ways in which personal experience can function as a legitimate resource for doing theology. Third, I will engage in a feminist's critique of religious authority. Fourth, I will place my

theologizing into the context of interreligious dialogue. Finally, I will point beyond my experiences and concerns to the manner in which my own religious authority framework functions as an invitation to interreligious dialogue on the college campus in a crosscultural or multicultural setting.

What Is Local Theology?

In Robert J. Schreiter's book, Constructing Local Theologies, he asks the question: "What is local theology?" The question is followed by his answer: "Obviously it is a complex process, aware of contexts, of histories, of the role of experience, of the need to encounter the traditions of faith in other believing communities."² Letty Russell, in Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective: A Theology, further defines local theology, saying, "There is no one style of theology" for each person has the freedom to choose his or her own style as it "develops out of tradition, education, and life experience."³ James Cone, in A Black Theology of Liberation, contributes his thoughts to the definition: "Theology is not universal language about God. Rather, it is human speech informed by historical and theological traditions . . . written for particular times

² Robert J. Schreiter, Constructing Local Theologies (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985), 20.

³ Letty M. Russell, Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective: A Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 52.

and places. . . . and addressed to a specific audience."⁴ He goes on to say that "although God is the intended subject of theology, God does not do theology . . . [rather,] 'human beings do theology.'"⁵ Cone and Russell seem to agree in their analysis that theology must be done contextually.⁶ This means that theology must be done by an inductive method whereby, in each situation or experience of oppression and suffering, the gospel speaks concretely to a people about their "particular needs for liberation and speaks in the language, life-style, and social structures of that particular place."⁷

Schreiter emphasizes that this kind of local theology concentrates on the conflictual elements that tear a community apart, such as oppression, struggle, violence, and power, and that these elements are greatly concerned with liberation and the need for change.⁸ Therefore, elaborates Cone, the task of local theology is to concentrate on and "to explicate the meaning of God's liberating activity so that those who labor under enslaving powers will see that

⁴ James Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986), xi-xii.

⁵ Cone, xix.

⁶ See Cone, xi; and Russell, Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective, 53.

⁷ Russell, Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective, 28.

⁸ Schreiter, 15.

the forces of liberation are the very activity of God" on behalf of the oppressed.⁹

As a Christian, feminist, clergywoman, and world citizen, I have both experienced oppression and have been an oppressor. On the one hand, I have benefitted from certain privileges as a white North American. At the same time, because of my particular experiences as a woman from the South, I have also been the recipient of oppression as well.

Looking back on my life, I recognize that my image of God, as well as my perspective on life, has been greatly affected by the issue of religious authority and persons within patriarchal, hierarchical, and religious institutions who have exercised that authority. Many of these persons have authorized themselves to interpret my human experience and determine what the gospel means to me.¹⁰ They have made unrealistic and conditional claims on me. Often they have claimed that traditions, institutions, reason, and revelation were on their side, giving them authority to disguise their misuse of power and control over me. Consequently, these religious authoritarians were often so convincing that they were successful at taking away my rights and privileges to do theology locally, in my own time

⁹ Cone, 3.

¹⁰ See Lynn N. Rhodes, Co-Creating: A Feminist Vision of Ministry (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 26.

and place, in my own culture, in my own community, and in dialogue with other believing communities.

Speaking as a Christian feminist, I have not been able to separate "the meaning of God's liberating activity" in my life from my experience and image of God. This has been a difficult task because, as [Choan-Seng] Song writes in Theology from the Womb of Asia, "theology has overlooked the female dimension of God's image. . . . 'The female part of God's image' has been suppressed and then forgotten by society and even by the Christian church and theology!"¹¹ Like many other women today, I have needed and wanted to experience God intimately and relationally in my life, but the continued use of patriarchal, male language has stood in the way. Additionally, it has been difficult to ascribe feminine language alone to God or to attempt to image God inclusively by forming, and using male and female language each time an image is called forth. However, the latter has proved somewhat more helpful.

After reading Carter Heyward's book, Touching Our Strength, I gained a profound and extremely helpful insight from her discussion about a more inclusive, intimate, and relational way to image God. More specifically, the following words from Heyward were enlightening: "God is not . . . above sex or gender, but rather is immersed in our gendered and erotic particularities. Therefore, it is

¹¹ Song, Theology from the Womb of Asia, 116.

appropriate and can be helpful to personalize divinity by ascribing to her or him a *fluid* [italics mine] sense of gender, an image that can change on the basis of human need."¹²

When I read Heyward's words, I felt a sense of gratitude. For the last three or four years, I had been trying to reformulate a personalized image of God that would be more inclusive of me, a woman. I also recognized that my image of God, over time and in different circumstances, has changed on the basis of human need. Thus, Heyward's words gave me (authorized me with) the freedom to image and name God in my own words and in my own context. Importantly then, I began to experience the freedom to image and name my own theology and, in the words of Rose Zoe-Obinga, to create "theological alternatives that are liberative" for me.¹³

¹² Isabel Carter Heyward, Touching Our Strength (San Francisco: Harper/Collins, 1989), 103. Heyward suggests that, on theological language and imagery, we refer to Nelle Morton, The Journey Is Home (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985); Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), and Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978); Beverly Wildung Harrison, "Sexism and the Language of Christian Ethics," in Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics, ed. Carol S. Robb (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 24-41; Linda Clark, Marian Ronan, and Eleanor Walker, Image-Breaking, Image-Building: A Handbook for Creative Worship with Women of the Christian Tradition (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1981); and Brian Wren, What Language Shall I Borrow? God-Talk in Worship: A Male Response to Feminist Theology (New York: Crossroad Publs., 1989).

¹³ Rose Zoe-Obinga, "From Accra to Wennappuwa: What is New? What More?," in Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity: Towards a Relevant Theology, ed. Virginia Fabella

Thus, with Heyward's more personalized image of God, I have been given the freedom to become a co-creator with God and name my own world, in my own words, and in my own context.

Personal Experience as a Primary Source
for Doing Theology

To quote Schreiter: "Autobiography or one's personal story has become an important procedural pathway for the development of a theology. . . ."¹⁴ This has been true in my experience as expressed similarly in the experience of Ivone Gebara,

I cannot avoid speaking about my own experience. In a vital way it makes me what I am. My theological experience is the product of my relationship with people, of mutual influences, of my philosophical and ideological stance, situated in time and space. The faith I have received from my childhood onward, the difficult and twisting path of my life, the discoveries I have made, the past and the present, have all left their mark on my experience of theology.¹⁵

Equally true for me is the fact that persons and institutions in authority--(family, church, society, culture, school)--have also left their indelible mark on my experience of theology. As I have indicated above, in my youth I was taught by a number of well-intended authorities that my primary function and role in life was to serve

(Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1980), 175.

¹⁴ Schreiter, 4.

¹⁵ Ivone Gebara, "Women Doing Theology in Latin America," in Through Her Eyes: Women's Theology from Latin America, ed. Elsa Tamez (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), 42.

others. Who I was and what I did was always to be governed or dictated by the desires, needs, and wishes of others. My needs were always to come last. To choose otherwise, I was told, meant I was being selfish, bad, insensitive or unchristian. Over time, my own personal identity became so wrapped up and enmeshed in my role as servant to others that I could not discern who I was apart from those whom I served. Tragically, naively, sadly, and out of feelings of guilt and fear, I allowed others to control my happiness and my future because I believed this was what was expected of me.

Moreover, little girls were never to praise themselves, never to complain, never to get angry, never to burden anyone with their troubles, and never to question authority. This unrealistic model for living life, more often than not, made me feel inadequate and unworthy as a person and insecure about who I really was.

Feelings of incompetence, of being unable to make decisions, were not uncommon for me. There were many days, as I have said above, when I felt unloved to the point of feeling invisible to others. I often worried that if I took the time to develop my sense of self or give attention to my own needs, then those whom I loved might somehow automatically be penalized because of my sinful, selfish

actions.¹⁶ Thus, I resolved to myself and to God that I would work harder at being a more faithful, committed, loyal servant to others.

To make things more complicated, as should be evident by now, my sense of self was further damaged by the expectations placed on my identical twin sister and me by our father, the authority figure and final word in our family. Because of social pressures and expectations inflicted subconsciously upon him, he insisted that the two of us dress exactly alike, wear our hairstyles alike, and share the same friends, interests, and moods. Even our names reflected the fact that we were twins--Rita Maye and Nita Faye (me). We were not allowed to develop our differences or to affirm our uniqueness as individuals.

Nonetheless, in the early seventies, in the context of the good news of the women's movement, I experienced my first glimmers of understanding regarding the ambiguous and competing claims of authorities on my life. Yet, these glimmers did not give me the knowledge or support system I needed in order to break free from the marginalization I felt within the confines of authoritarianism. However, one thing I did know was that I no longer wanted to spend my energies "internalizing alien criteria" or denying my own

¹⁶ See Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule, Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 46.

gut feelings and experiences.¹⁷ I knew that somehow I must find a way to accept and claim my own experience as a valid source of authority for living my life.

The following story shared by Carter Heyward gives a beautiful image about what it means to take control of one's life and claim one's own authority.

Once there was a wise old woman, a witch who lived in a small village. The children of the village were puzzled by her--her wisdom, her gentleness, her strength, and her magic. One day several of the children decided to fool the old woman. They believed that no one could be as wise as everyone said she was, and they were determined to prove it. So the children found a baby bird and one of the little boys cupped it in his hands and said to his playmates, "We'll ask her whether the bird I have in my hands is dead or alive. If she says it's dead, I'll open my hands and let it fly away. If she says it's alive, I'll crush it in my hands and she'll see that it's dead." And the children went to the old witch and presented her with this puzzle. "Old woman," the little boy asked, "This bird in my hands--is it dead or alive?" The old woman became very still, studied the boy's hands, and then looked carefully into his eyes. "It's in your hands," she said.¹⁸

It wasn't until the mid-1980s that I understood the relationship between self-independence and dependence upon alien religious authorities. In 1986 my spouse and I entered into a commuter marriage, and, shortly thereafter, I was hired as a college chaplain. Over time I gained inner

¹⁷ See Kyung, 110.

¹⁸ Isabel Carter Heyward, Our Passion for Justice: Images of Power, Sexuality, and Liberation (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984), 183. Heyward acknowledges in her footnote that she does not know the source of this story though she has "heard it many times in different forms." See p. 263.

strength and self-confidence and experienced being in control of my life--it was in my hands. I began to look for ways to free myself from religious authoritarian oppression. And, eventually, I began to rely on my own experience as a source of authority.

Through my work as a chaplain, I claimed my own authority as a minister and began to experience more fully who I was as a person and a professional. As I named my experiences with my own terms, intuition, intelligence, and understanding, I became more and more liberated. Significantly, I found myself touching that which was real inside of me and around me; and there I met God¹⁹ and found that I have a contribution to make "to the unfinished dimension of theology."²⁰

I must admit, however, that there is still a small part of me that, from time to time, lapses into moments or periods of doubt about whether this is really true. Therefore, in light of these experiences--like many other Christian feminists--I too have developed "a suspicion about

¹⁹ See Kyung's discussion about second-generation liberation theologians who name their theological experiences and alternatives with their own words that are liberating for them. Like these women, I too believe in my own experiences, and take myself seriously as a theologian and recognize my ability to articulate my faith. I particularly identify with Kyung's statement about meeting God in that which is real and tangible inside and around me. See Kyung, 110.

²⁰ Russell, Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective, 53.

all externally given interpretations of the meaning of Christianity"²¹ and the meaning of my own religious experience. This hermeneutic of suspicion has been helpful because it has served as a catalyst in my search for truth. It has also informed my own working hermeneutic wherein I weave in and out and back and forth from my own cycle of personal experience to others' experiences, from others' experiences to personal experience, from personal experience to personal experience, and so on.

Pamela Dickey Young, in Feminist Theology/Christian Theology: In Search of Method, says that critical interpretation begins "with questions that arise out of life and out of the experience of those who cry for deliverance; not simply with those of the 'non-believer' but with those of the 'non-person.'"²² These questions must be addressed to the Christian tradition, to the Bible, and to the life of Jesus Christ, whom Gustavo Gutierrez describes as "the hermeneutical principle for all understanding of the [Christian] faith."²³

²¹ Rhodes, 26.

²² Young, 46.

²³ Gustavo Gutierrez, The Truth Shall Make You Free: Confrontations, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), 104-05. Gutierrez explains further that "[i]n Jesus we encounter God, . . . the Christ of God . . . [who is] the irruption into history of the one by whom everything was made and everything was saved. This, then, is the fundamental hermeneutical circle: from humanity to God and from God to humanity, from history to faith and from faith to history, from the human word to the word of

The story in the Old Testament about Ruth and Naomi, writes Rita Petruziello, is a beautiful example of how two women, living in a male-dominated, patriarchal society, had to determine their own survival, initiate their own actions, and respond to the limitations and boundaries they faced as women and widows. Yet, in spite of the barriers of oppression, Petruziello says, Ruth and Naomi became "catalysts for divine intervention. They shock[ed], they provoke[d], they intimidate[d], and they demonstrate[d] the delicate art of coping and caring in a remarkable feminine way."²⁴ In fact, she says, "Theirs is the story of human persons who yearn to contribute to the community in the face of all obstacles."²⁵

These women, in no small way, exemplify for me a live-ing theology. They did not just talk or think about God; rather, they participated as subjects in their own liberation, and they gave meaning to the realities of their lived oppression and their lived religious experience. Theirs was certainly a praxis of faith born out of the

the Lord and from the word of the Lord to the human word, from the love of one's brothers and sisters to the love of the Father [and Mother] and from the love of the Father [and Mother] to the love of one's brothers and sisters, from human justice to God's holiness and from God's holiness to human justice."

²⁴ Ruth Petruziello, "Reading," in More Than Words: Prayer and Ritual for Inclusive Communities, eds. Janet Schaffran and Pat Kozak (Oak Park, Ill.: Meyer-Stone Books, 1986), 130.

²⁵ Petruziello, 30.

dialectical process of concurrent reflection and practice, practice and reflection, which I believe are essential ingredients of the theological process. Their kind of theology is one that Letty Russell says flows out of action into action.²⁶

Furthermore, this section of the chapter on personal experience and theology requires that some attention be given to community and compassion. Even though my life as a young girl was entrenched with an oppressive framework of authoritarianism, I nevertheless found God and experienced a people who loved and cared about me in the context of the local church. Quite a few of these persons of faith lived life passionately because of their identification with and participation in the lives of those who suffered in their community. It was through them that I learned how to take risks and how to touch another person's wound, thereby, exposing myself to another person's pain. It was through and from these people of faith that I learned about compassion. Thus, as a chaplain later on, I learned how to catch the tears of students who were hurting and how quietly to shoulder their pain and their healing.²⁷ It was also

²⁶ Russell, Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective, 55.

²⁷ See Kidd, "Birthing Compassion," 29-30. When my daughter was very young and was sobbing about a traumatic experience in her life, I wanted to share in her trauma in a compassionate way that exemplified my understanding of her plight. I took a small paper cup from our bathroom sink and held it to her cheek so as to catch her tears (so to speak)

through these persons of faith that I recognized how important it is to nurture and cultivate the rhythms of passion in my life along with the rhythms of compassion.²⁸

[Choan-Seng] Song writes that "*theo*-logy without rhythms of passion is no '*theo*'logy at all."²⁹ Song's words depict my experience as a chaplain--when I began to believe that my human passion should echo God's passion, and that my passion must become the power, the energy, of my theology.³⁰ In this specific way, I began to work on ways that my living theology could embody an energetic, active passion that flowed out of my deep compassion. No longer could I remain oppressed by religious authorities, and no longer could I sit back and watch others be oppressed as well.

A Feminist's Critique of Religious Authority

Until I had worked for a year as chaplain at Stephens, I did not realize how difficult it would be to maintain my identity and integrity as a Christian, while, at the same time, not allowing it to limit my decisions as chaplain in a pluralistic context. It was important to me that I be able

in the cup. Each time I caught a tear I showed the cup to her and talked about how beautiful and how special her tears were. Soon, her sobbing lessened, and she began to focus her interest in her tears rather than on the tragedy in her life. The two of us then began the healing process together.

²⁸ See Song, Theology from the Womb of Asia, 68.

²⁹ Song, Theology from the Womb of Asia, 68.

³⁰ Song, Theology from the Womb of Asia, 68.

to represent the entire college community as a pluralistic whole as well as minister to each of its religious particularities (individuals and groups). For all practical purposes, as a professional employee of the college, I served as a religious authority on campus.

I had spent the whole of my life (up to that point) actively responding to life out of a Christian framework. Yet, I had also spent a number of years living out my commitment to ecumenical interaction and interfaith dialogue. In spite of my commitments, I had had very limited first-hand experience in interfaith dialogue or interfaith worship planning or participation. Even though I had observed, been taught about, or read about other religious traditions, my knowledge of them outside the Protestant traditions was very sketchy at best. Nevertheless, at Stephens I wanted to enter fully into the role of the chaplain as religious authority in a pluralistic context, without losing sight of what is central to Christianity and without compromising the essence of my Christian or feminist ideals.³¹ I wanted to find a balance between living out my life as a Christian while respecting and valuing those religious traditions that were different from my own.

The balance I wanted to find is like that found in walking a tightrope. Pamela Dickey Young visualizes this

³¹ See Young, especially pp. 90-93 and 113-14.

kind of balance as one that is required when a person is attempting to carry two heavy objects. The weight, she says, must continually be shifted in order to maintain an equilibrium, keeping ever before the person the sight of her or his goal without being so weighted down by it that she or he is immobilized by it.³² With this in mind, I wanted to keep ever before me "the force of that adjective [Christianity] in relation to [my own] theology."³³ In the meantime, I also wanted to participate in more interfaith dialogues so that my theology could be more in touch with what makes each particular religious tradition unique.³⁴

The longer I served as chaplain, the more I worked at knowing, understanding, and believing my own theology so that in my ministry I could act with integrity and authority. I wanted my ministry to reflect this:

[f]or in every act the chaplain does; in every prayer, homily, address, charge, invocation, grace, or benediction the chaplain utters, in the context of every conversation in every counseling case; in every program created and project carried out in ministering to others and to the college itself, the suppositions, beliefs, and convictions that form the theology of the chaplain will be seen, felt, and heard. Such religious convictions, thought through or not, will leap out in community;

³² Young, 114. Though Young's description relates more specifically to the "doing" of Christian feminist theology, her analogy is appropriate here as well.

³³ Young, 79.

³⁴ See Young, 76.

they will inform the language and drive the decisions the chaplain makes.³⁵

Therefore, I became more and more committed to actualizing my work as a chaplain in a ministry that viewed people as the subjects of their own theology and that affirmed diversity as well as particularity and uniqueness. I worked harder at maintaining a tightrope-walking-kind-of-balance as I allowed the authority of my own faith tradition to enter into a dialogue of partnership with others in the religious community. I came to believe more strongly that "the authority of the Christian faith is finally dependent upon its actual transforming activity in life experiences" as it gives meaning and value to a person's life.³⁶ After all, it is only in the mutual sharing of particular experiences rooted in communities of shared power, claims Lynn Rhodes, that "the truth and meaning of lives can be fully expressed and known," . . . although each person's or group's experience possesses "its own integrity and validity."³⁷ In this context then, what is ultimately important for me and my ministry is that "the experience is always relational."³⁸

³⁵ Brummett, 108.

³⁶ Rhodes, 49.

³⁷ Rhodes, 49.

³⁸ Rhodes, 49.

The Importance of Interreligious Dialogue

When I served as chaplain, those in authority worried that religious life would not be inclusive of the plurality of the religious traditions represented on our campus. So they lobbied for accommodation, compromise, peace, and harmony to be the foundational objectives for the religious life program--no matter what the cost or consequences of those actions implied. I gained two valuable insights from that experience:

1. It is extremely important for each religious tradition to be able to maintain its integrity and its unique identity as a tradition in the midst of a pluralistic community.

2. Interreligious dialogue can play a crucial role in bringing about change in oppressive attitudes and practices.

When I became aware of these facts, I decided that those educators in authority on our campus, along with our three religious advisors to students, would need some further education regarding relational, interreligious dialogue. The education would take place in the form of interreligious dialogue and in an atmosphere where religious (or spiritual) persons could encounter each other and share stories about their religious experiences and their insights regarding the mysteries of God or the Divine.³⁹

³⁹ See Maura O'Neill, Women Speaking, Women Listening: Women in Interreligious Dialogue (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), 3. O'Neill states that "the reasons for beginning in

I hoped, like Raimundo Pannikar, that, through dialogue and the telling of each person's religious or spiritual story, our various religions and cultures would meet and be revealed in the heart of each person rather than in the *mind*.⁴⁰ In this unique way, students could "discover their points of commonality and distinction among themselves."⁴¹ Maura O'Neill claims that, if a person's responses and feelings can be conveyed in story form, then her or his experiences of liberation or oppression will necessarily be more adequately portrayed and more fully understood by the other person in the dialogue.⁴²

It is also important that dialogue include discussion and storytelling that is related to each person's image of the Divine. As was mentioned earlier in this project, Carter Heyward writes that it is appropriate to personalize divinity by ascribing to the Divine a fluid sense of gender that can change on the basis of human need.⁴³ As I thought about Heyward's words in the context of interreligious

dialogue with the telling of stories are the following: (1) to create an atmosphere of trust, (2) to clarify diverse perspectives, (3) to prevent abstract and irrelevant theorizing, and (4) to discover the points of commonality and distinction." See p. 89.

⁴⁰ Raimundo Pannikar, The Unknown Christ of Hinduism, rev. ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1981), 43.

⁴¹ O'Neill, 93.

⁴² O'Neill, 93.

⁴³ Heyward, Touching Our Strength, 103.

dialogue, I reflected on how my image of God (the Divine) has been closely connected to my own personal experience of my world. As I reflected further, I realized that no name, image, or concept that I have used to speak of the Divine has ever arrived at its goal because the Divine "is essentially incomprehensible."⁴⁴

Johnson states that no words alone or taken together can exhaust the reality of the divine mystery or deliver a definitive understanding of God in a diverse world that offers us "fragments of beauty, goodness, and truth, both social and cosmic, facets of reality that point us in different ways to the one ineffable source and goal of all."⁴⁵ Furthermore, as women attempt to find emancipatory speech about God, according to Johnson, they are fortunate to have a rich heritage of classical themes from which to draw: the incomprehensibility of God, the analogical nature of religious language, and the necessity to have many names for God. Therefore, they can move their "speech about God into directions more sensitive to women's interpreted experience and ultimately more liberating for all creatures, human beings, and the earth."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Elizabeth A. Johnson, She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse (New York: Crossroad Publs., 1992), 117.

⁴⁵ Johnson, She Who Is, 118-20.

⁴⁶ Johnson, She Who Is, 120.

As a complimentary voice to Johnson's as we look at ways to process interreligious dialogue, Marjorie Procter-Smith emphasizes the important role of silence that creates "the space necessary for new names, new models, and new images" that are recognizable and allow us to engage both our memories and our imaginations.⁴⁷ Silence is also important as it reminds us that there are no names sufficient for God. Thus, it is also in the namelessness of God, the Divine, that countless, nameless women of the past find a commonality with God because even the power of human naming of the God we worship "cannot restore to us [women] what has already been lost through false naming."⁴⁸ Perhaps these liberating insights about our image of the Divine from Heyward, Johnson, and Procter-Smith can serve as catalysts for facilitating greater communication between persons and groups in interreligious dialogue.

Finally, the telling of our stories to each other can serve as the common thread through which interfaith dialogue finds a pathway to become actualized in our lives. Interfaith dialogue can be the place where our human experiences find lasting significance, where our communicated images of the Divine can serve as enablers in the dialogue rather than as threats to our existence, and where the Divine can become incarnated in each of our lives.

⁴⁷ Procter-Smith, 115.

⁴⁸ Procter-Smith, 115.

It is the place where our storytelling can reveal "lives of love fulfilled and betrayed," stories of "faith heightened and shattered," and the dramas of "dreams come true and torn into shreds."⁴⁹

In the final analysis then, it is in the telling of our stories and our reflections on our life experiences wherein our local theology can find a home. It is also the place where those who are religious or spiritual can take steps toward being accountable to those who are oppressed, to those within their diverse communities of faith, to themselves, and to God. After all, is this not the main purpose of dialogue?

Conclusion

Though we as college chaplains still have new truths to discover, new theologies to form, and new adventures in faith yet to imagine, we must not allow the challenges of oppressive religious authority to dissuade us from entering into what can be relational, interreligious dialogue. We must create a space in the dialogue for each participant to claim her or his experience as a valid source of religious authority.

At the same time, as chaplains enter into interfaith dialogue, certain guidelines will be helpful:

1. We must remember not to allow our personal, past or present religious traditions to immobilize us.

⁴⁹ Song, Theology from the Womb of Asia, 74.

2. If we are to maintain our integrity and identity with a particular religious tradition, we must decide for ourselves what is unique to our tradition and what is not, expecting and allowing those from other traditions to do the same.

3. We must remain open to multiple images of the Divine that might have meaning for students in their own time, place, and context.

4. We must hope that the process of interreligious dialogue will empower and energize each of us with a passion for continuing the dialogue until there is some semblance of mutual understanding that constructively crosses the conflicting lines of race, class, religion, culture, and gender.

PART THREE

CHAPTER 6

Autobiography in the Context of a Multicultural World:

Eliciting Unexpressed Stories as a Step Toward

Creating *Our Story*

From the outset this project has been developed with praxis as its focus. This is to say that the college campus, as a setting for ministry to students, has provided the broadest horizon for the development of the dissertation's content. In this chapter I will be more explicit and demonstrate how the autobiographical method of personal and theological reflection, utilized in chapters two through five, can be adapted and, consequently, used as a resource for ministry with students on campuses characterized by cultural and religious diversity.

The method I propose is what I am calling autotheography; it is relevant to any college campus in which there is uneven distribution of power and privilege. Any social arrangement which marginalizes and estranges people, or breaks down a sense of community, should be a potential setting for involving persons in the autobiographical enterprise I advocate. The description of method will take the form of basic principles, rather than specific guidelines or parameters for identifying students with whom to work, for enlisting them as participants in the process, for determining size or composition of groups, for developing potential time frames for structuring groups

temporarily, or for strategies used to evaluate groups and impact broader structures of the institution. I also do not intend to develop a how-to, instructional manual for chaplains who might wish to incorporate autobiography into their various ministry strategies.

Basic to this chapter is the elaboration of four key principles that are essential to the formation of an autotheographical community. Each principle can be adapted to any number of institutional settings and program designs. Each includes a process for eliciting unexpressed stories from students as a step toward creating our story within the larger context of the campus community.

Autotheography as Praxis of a Community-in-the-Making

The making, shaping, and forming of a community of meaning is what I have chosen to call "autotheography." This is a community born within diversity, a community whose story is open-ended, emerging, and birthed from the story-praxis¹ of a group purposely intent on telling, hearing, and affirming its members' stories. It is a community committed to the work of giving theological shape to their own stories and their community story. It is a community based on harmony and equality, not sameness; on solidarity, not

¹ I am following the notion of praxis as adopted and adapted by the Mud Flower Collective, "a willingness to relate [together] in a praxis of diverse life experiences." Mud Flower Collective, 16.

uniformity. It is a storied community made up of autotheographers who are doing autotheography--a kind of interactive, back-and-forth, in-and-out, "personal and theological interweaving in which each has integrity and each interacts richly with the others."² Moreover, it is the autotheographical community to which the college chaplain is called to minister--no matter what confessional tradition she or he represents.

As we take a closer look at the autotheographical community-in-the-making, it will be helpful to identify the ethical underpinnings which have informed my own construction of this kind of community-in-the-making. More concretely, this means recognizing that the chaplain's work --no matter how inclusive it attempts to be--takes place in an institutional setting which is being challenged at its foundations by multiculturalism. Moreover, multiculturalism has brought with it a burgeoning religious diversity. This diversity has served to challenge the very foundations of religious life on the college campus and the role of the chaplain in that context. Therefore, the chaplain must be clear about what it means to build community in this kind of culturally and religiously diverse context if she or he is

² This phrase is quoted from a written response on my paper, "Servanthood and Self-Denial: Bad News or Good News for Women?," for the course, "Feminist Views of Human Existence," taught by Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, 24 April 1992, School of Theology at Claremont, Calif.

going to minister effectively. Perhaps a story will best clarify what I mean.

The place to begin the story is with a notion which first came to my attention while assisting my husband piece together an early draft of his first doctoral dissertation. He was trying to articulate his understanding of the moral life and the development of moral character. Though not entirely satisfied with any of the models he had found in the literature, he noticed himself coming back repeatedly to a phrase he had heard years earlier from an ethics professor. As he remembered it, it was the idea that the moral self is both "latent and nascent." This is to say that human moral capacities are neither (by nature) a given nor (by nurture) an imposition. Rather, they are always present potentially (latent), but also growing and responsive to stimulation from the environment (nascent). Long before a child's moral capacities have any referent in experience, the parent believes, expects, and anticipates that such capacities are present and will one day become evident. Yet, the parent must act in present tense to enhance and enrich that potential, long before it can become actualized.

Keeping the above example in mind, I wish to apply those same claims, regarding moral selfhood, to community, rather than to an individual.

At one time in the course of our United States' history, campus diversity was obscured by an ethos of religious, cultural, and theoretical hegemony. As those hegemonies have come under significant challenge and have been severely undermined by demographic changes, the notion of community on college campuses has come to stand for exclusivity rather than inclusiveness. The rapid growth in the numbers and influence of diverse groups and cultures has led to a proliferation of departments, programs, and courses that represent this growing diversity. Accordingly, the notion of the campus itself as a community has become largely non-existent in more cases than not. Campus values, at one time thought to be clearly distinguishable from those of the larger society, are seen increasingly as indistinguishable from those of the dominant consumerist culture. In addition, the chaplain (in far too many cases) serves an institution but not an identifiable community. Therefore, the community in which the chaplain serves possesses moral capacities that are both latent and nascent.

On the one hand, the community is latent--it has potential. Belief and commitment in and to its existence is based upon convictions regarding the narrative character of human life and the necessity of storytelling and storylistening for human flourishing. There is latent within all kinds of student bodies, the potential to incarnate a community not based upon the hegemony of one

group over others. This kind of community is rooted in stories-yet-to-be-expressed.

At the same time, the college community is also nascent--it is coming to be; it is growing and responsive. It is emerging from the depths of the lives of students who do not know themselves, who face very uncertain futures, and who share unclear relationships to the reference groups who should be providing them with resources for meaning to their lives. This is becoming more and more evident among all campus groups that emerge and seek to place the stamps of their perspectives on the curriculum and the social life of the college. In this context each group must come to terms with how its various members will relate with those "other" persons outside their particular group. There is a larger world, a global economy, and a marketplace of ideas in which they must live (and, perhaps, either compete or flourish). Hence, there is a need for college students to be open to and become a part of an inclusive, narrative community in an environment that will nourish and encourage its actualization.

Importantly then, a narrative community that is rooted in its stories-yet-to-be-expressed and is incarnated in its stories-being-expressed will likely become a praxis-oriented, autotheographical community. It will be one that has been given guidance from the chaplain and has seen active involvement from its members, who take the time to

weave together their personal, theological, and communal stories. Accordingly, there is a process that the chaplain can follow in attempting to bring this kind of community into reality.

Key Principles Essential to the Formation
of an Autotheographical Community

Before elaborating on some key principles essential to the formation of an autotheographical community, I must clarify that, on a multiculturally, religiously diverse campus, there is little that can be presupposed with respect to religious programming. The very notion of how to structure a year of events and activities is not an easy task when the chaplain takes student diversity seriously. When this happens, a structure becomes dramatically more complex and time-consuming because the needs, traditions, and mores of everyone involved must be given full weight as decisions are made. Not surprisingly, the chaplain may be more inclined to give lip service to diversity rather than incorporate it into the planning processes. Therefore, sometimes it can be easier to detour around diversity than to come to terms with it or embrace it.

Clearly--and other chaplains' experiences on campuses across the country bear this out--the least difficult way to accommodate differences, while at the same time respecting them, is to allow or encourage program proliferation. Liberal thinking in academia has gravitated toward

proliferation (of such things as courses or departments of study) as its basic strategy for managing diversity issues, especially where identifiable groups become powerful enough to lobby for change. The effectiveness of this method of accommodation is suspect nonetheless.

On the one hand, it is certainly true that respecting the concerns of Native American students, for example, by instituting a course (or a program) in Native American studies is both expedient politically and respectful institutionally. It is also extremely important and necessary that courses be taught about ethnic and cultural histories and backgrounds in order to teach pride in and preservation of ethnic and cultural identities. Yet, on the other hand, if the institution offers separate ethnic studies courses only as a simplified, stopgap strategy for managing (rather than dealing with) diversity issues and problems, this kind of strategy does not always facilitate bringing students from the dominant culture on the campus and Native American students into a deeper understanding of one another, much less a deeper appreciation for each other. While the merits of such a strategy, as a matter of academic administration, may continue to be championed by deans, provosts, presidents, chancellors, trustees, and curators, there are good reasons for rejecting it as the exclusive (perhaps even primary) approach to dealing with diversity. Within religious life programs especially, there is a

legitimate need, if not responsibility, for supplementing proliferation with committed, faithful efforts to initiate and sustain dialogue to find common ground, enhance mutual understanding, and contribute toward building a deeper and wider sense of community on the campus (across lines of perceived difference).

If such dialogue is to be effective, it must be structured in such a way as to hold in tension two essential but competing values. In the first instance, there must be a respect for the cultural (or group) identity, heritage, or uniqueness claimed by each individual in the dialogue. Secondly, there must also be a commitment on the part of all participants to an open pursuit of finding commonalities and compatibilities that can transcend lines of perceived differences. It is precisely this kind of dialogue that institutions of higher learning severely lack and desperately need. If this is the case, then how might such dialogue be facilitated?

In order to yield meaningful results in the direction of a greater sense of community on the campus, dialogue should not begin with a structure around public issues or concerns of groups. Rather, in the beginning, groups of students should get acquainted through the dialogical use of autobiography--the first key principle that is essential in the chaplain's autotheographical ministry on a multicultural, religiously diverse campus.

1. Begin with Story. To be effective in helping students to make meaning in their lives and to build community among themselves, the content of dialogue should focus initially on students coming to a deeper understanding of themselves before seeking a deeper understanding of others in the group. On its face this principle may appear to be little more than a procedural one; yet, the principle is more than a manner of proceeding. Beginning with personal stories affirms some central convictions about a person's humanness. Sue Monk Kidd recognizes that our personal stories are essential expressions of the spiritual quest. Indeed, "without such stories we cannot be fully human, for without them we are unable to articulate or even understand our deepest experiences."³

Further, it is important to note that for students to become narrators of their own unique stories is not a given. The rendering of their inner tale as a story requires a certain spiritual discipline, a discipline practiced much too infrequently in our culture. Therefore, it is possible, for students to emerge in our society "without a story."⁴ Sadly,

[m]any of us left the storied approach to life at our nursery windows and crossed the threshold into adulthood to more logical, didactic ways of making sense of the world. In a culture that is rational,

³ Sue Monk Kidd, "The Story-Shaped Life," Weavings 4, no. 1 (1989): 21.

⁴ Kidd, "The Story-Shaped Life," 21.

scientific, and abstract, we have lost touch with the intuitive, imaginative, and concrete dimensions which inform story.⁵

In a similar vein, Gertrud Mueller Nelson frames the loss of this essential human activity by so many persons as a kind of "fall," facilitated by a preoccupation with knowledge, prediction and control, and a disdain for the child's play of storytelling. She proposes that

[o]ur way back to a connection with God is through the profound experience of our humanity and the discovery of meaning. When we are struck with the meaning of our most human experiences, we are most closely connected with the divine.⁶

Michael Novak amplifies and clarifies Nelson's rendering by underscoring the centrality of story to experience, cognition, and human uniqueness.

Story, then, is a method. It is an ancient and altogether human method. The human being alone among the creatures on the earth is a storytelling animal: sees the present rising out of the past, heading into the future; perceives reality in narrative form. . . . Prior to thinking is storytelling, in at least two respects: reliance on the imagination and upon intention.⁷

Stated once again, this essential human activity is not a given minus learning and discipline. Transforming students' inner journeys into narratives requires investment

⁵ Kidd, "The Story-Shaped Life," 21.

⁶ Gertrud Mueller Nelson, To Dance with God: Family Ritual and Community Celebration (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 4.

⁷ Michael Novak, "'Story' and Experience," in Religion as Story, ed. James B. Wiggins (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 175-77.

and effort, but the yield which accrues is life-enhancing. Working with students' inner stories in this way "creates identity," "sustains us [them] in the midst of suffering," and "transforms by reorienting us [them] to new truth and insight."⁸ In addition, James Wiggins adds that the development of one's own story allows the storyteller to grasp her or his own distinctiveness and commonality.⁹ Therefore, structured, as well as open-ended, autobiographical activities for students--written and oral, individual and communal--should be developed.

As was demonstrated in Chapter 2, one place to begin with autobiography is to write about significant people, places, or events in one's life. As students' comfort levels with such writing increase, their ability to be self-disclosive will increase as well. It should be emphasized, however, that arriving at this point is a hard-earned achievement, not an automatic process. Indeed, the difficulty entailed in pursuing just such an achievement has been chronicled by a group of women who named themselves the Mud Flower Collective.

Black women, Hispanic women, white women, Jewish women, Christian women, postchristian women, lesbian women, and straight women have much to gain in sharing our stories. But we do not propose for a minute that this can simply happen. . . . [S]uch

⁸ Kidd, "The Story-Shaped Life," 22-24.

⁹ James B. Wiggins, "Within and Without Stories," in Religion as Story, ed. James B. Wiggins (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 17.

sharing, such revelation of both oneself and one's God, is not easy work.¹⁰

For students to be able to share or write about their stories in a group presupposes at least two realities.¹¹ In the first instance, the student must know her or his own story. While it might seem that nothing could be simpler, this is not the case, especially for women students. In the case of white, economically comfortable women, according to the Mud Flower Collective, many of their experiences "have been dulled by false lessons that race, gender, and class are irrelevant" to their lives and relationships.¹² By contrast, says the Collective, women of color and poorer white women have sharper memories of these realities and the influence on their lives. Thus, the sharing of one's story --for a woman--may not be an easy task or it may not be easily understood by persons whose experiences are opposite or different from their own.

The second reality presupposed in students' sharing their stories is the reality of trust that will hopefully be formed from active listening and sharing within the group. For example, as witnessed to by the women in the Mud Flower Collective,

sharing our lives requires, second, a sense of trust that is by no means automatic, even among

¹⁰ Mud Flower Collective, 69.

¹¹ Mud Flower Collective, 69.

¹² Mud Flower Collective, 69.

women who genuinely seek community. Among us white women and racial/ethnic women, sharing our experiences requires a willingness to be vulnerable and to risk saying things that our friends may not want to hear. . . . Whenever we racial/ethnic women open our mouths around members of the dominant race and ethnic background, we risk coming up once more against feelings of worthlessness, as if our words are silence, and will be heard, recorded and read through white sensibilities.¹³

[Choan-Seng] Song aptly analyzes these difficulties in his "Allegory of the Mouse Language," based upon his interpretation of "Alice's Pool of Tears" from Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass.¹⁴ His analysis implies that, for students to be able effectively to write about or tell their stories in a multi-group context presupposes radical listening first, as a precondition for sharing across lines of perceived differences. Otherwise, our best efforts to communicate our stories will only drive people further away or create divisions within the community.¹⁵

Hence, groups that are formed for the purpose of empowering students' to develop and shape themselves autobiographically must proceed carefully. Yet, in time it will become possible for students to begin to identify,

¹³ Mud Flower Collective, 69-70.

¹⁴ See Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass (London: Macmillan Publs., 1971), 21-24.

¹⁵ [Choan-Seng] Song, Tell Us Our Names: Story Theology from an Asian Perspective (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1984), 52-53.

discuss, and write vignettes from their lives which they consider to be paradigmatic for understanding themselves as individuals.

2. Identify a Context of Meaning. The next key principle in autotheography is for the chaplain to encourage students to identify other stories within their context. These could be stories of other people--whether actual or fictional--with whom they have a keen sense of identification, and in which they discern a pattern of meaning. (Earlier, in Chapter 3, I illustrated this process by identifying and writing about films whose characters and story lines became stories rich with meaning for me.) In this storied process, students may need encouragement and, possibly, concrete suggestions from their own heritage or community which might yield images, metaphors, myths, models, or stories with which they can identify and make meaning.

The point at issue here is not primarily procedural. In order for students to be able to develop meaning-full narratives for their lives, the impoverishment of their imagination must be addressed. Stated alternatively, before students will be able to value their own lives enough to express them as stories, they will need to gain experience in accessing their reservoirs of images, metaphors, myths, models, and stories. These are essential tools of the imagination that students can use to create narratives.

On many campuses today, a large number of students suffer from imagination retardation. They tend to be stifled unwittingly by the poverty of images and story-lines available to them from a culture oriented toward the sale of consumer products and services. Moreover, imaginative and intuitive capacities tend to be devalued in a society preoccupied with thinking which is logical, linear, scientific, and technological.

Under such conditions, students need alternative images upon which to draw in order to imagine alternatively.¹⁶ Devoid of alternative imagining, self-understandings too frequently become captive to the prevailing images of a consumerist culture, leaving students vulnerable to manipulation by the wizards of Madison Avenue and beyond. These wizards underwrite our society's patriarchalism, militarism, classism, racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression upon which we depend to define our social roles, possibilities, and success.

Coming at the same point in a different manner, the chaplain who would encourage students to value themselves and their stories cannot be "indifferent to the basic images that are the lifeblood of interpretation and that greatly

¹⁶ This point is made specifically about theologians needing to image God alternatively in Sallie McFague, Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982). See especially pp. 160-64.

influence people's perceptions and behavior."¹⁷ To free students to find authentic tools for self-appreciation, self-expression, and self-narration, students must be funded with a reservoir of images, metaphors, myths, models, and stories which offer genuine alternatives to those served on the standard menu of options by the dominant culture.

Failure to engage this need for alternative imagining is to undermine students' capacities to be productively and effectively autobiographical, and to leave them rather to the vacuousness and sterility of the prevailing images of our culture. At best, those images can merely provide a gloss on human reality, or a thin veneer over it; the richness of human experience demands thicker images and richer metaphors than the dominant culture is likely to afford.

3. Connect to the Community. Along with the first two key principles that are essential to the chaplain's autotheographical ministry, comes a third principle. Students need to be led to identify a paradigmatic story, myth, epic poem, song, or other literary (or oral) tradition that is central to the community with which they most closely identify. In turn, students should be encouraged to share the meaning of their primary community story and to relate that story with the larger communal story (including

¹⁷ This quotation references a limitation within contemporary theology, but I am applying the point more broadly. See McFague, Metaphorical Theology, xi.

points of correspondence and difference). In this regard, it may be fitting for them to share with the community some feelings, insights, facts, or information about family background: history, rituals, traditions, celebrations, relationships, and so forth, that may help the community to identify with or understand their personal story. Such sharing can make students' stories more understandable and more meaningful to themselves and members of the community.

This principle is illustrated with depth and poignancy in the story of Chung Hyun Kyung. She remarks that the writing of her book, Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology, "was like a long journey home."¹⁸ It began as the task to write her doctoral dissertation at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Her dissertation advisor, James Cone, encouraged her to write about "something that hurts you the most."¹⁹ This prompted her decision to focus on the emerging theology of Asian women who are struggling to overcome every imaginable form of oppression and suffering.

In the process, Kyung found herself on occasion estranged from the realities of the people's lives of whom she was writing. Caught up in the myriad of expectations of the hierarchies of higher education and the Eurocentric assumptions regarding sound scholarship, she began to feel

¹⁸ Kyung, xi.

¹⁹ Kyung, xii.

she was losing her bearings. She was chastised by Professor Cone to repent of her "sin of profundity," "to trust Asian women's theological wisdom," and to "describe it simply and plainly."²⁰

Taking Cone's admonition with great seriousness, Kyung began to explore, examine, and understand more deeply the specific and concrete realities and pain of Asian women, especially those women in her divided homeland of Korea. She also began to be more in touch with her own pain and anger.

The result of her quest to grasp the stories of Asian women and her own story generated more questions than answers. In particular, her discovery that she was actually birthed by a surrogate mother, and her eventual reunion with that mother, led her to a staggering array of questions regarding identity. Being a Christian from Asia only served to complexify her attempts at self-understanding.

Accordingly, Kyung's approach to bring her personal story into dialogue with the Jesus Story was decidedly different from my own. At the conclusion of her book, Kyung expresses the hope that Asian women will move in the direction of risking an open-ended theology which acknowledges the multiplicity of components within their shared identity, that which is part of, yet distinctive from, the larger Christian community. Consequently, she

²⁰ Kyung, xii.

calls for a *survival-liberation centered syncretism*²¹ that will empower Asian women to become liberated and claim their humanity.

Hence, Kyung defines herself in her context and historicity; she does so in relationship to the overlapping communities of which she is a part. In a remarkable way, Kyung pioneers an uncharted territory through which her example can beckon chaplains and their students to explore, no matter what different heritages are represented in the campus community. In her words to Christian, Asian women theologians, she inadvertently challenges chaplains and students to

move away from our imposed fear of losing Christian identity, in the opinion of the mainline theological circles, and instead risk that we might be transformed by the religious wisdom of our own people. We may find that to the extent that we are willing to lose our identity, we will be transformed into truly Asian Christians. We have to ask tough questions of the mainline Christian churches and seminaries and also of ourselves. Who owns Christianity? Is Christianity unchangeable? What makes Christianity Christian? How far can we make ourselves vulnerable in order to be both truly Asian and truly Christian?²²

Therefore, those of us who minister in institutions of higher education should guide our students through a process of connecting their personal stories with the primary community group story as well as with the larger communal

²¹ Kyung, 113.

²² Kyung, 118.

story, even if it means risking alienating themselves from the communities without whom they would not be who they are.

4. Reflect upon the Story. The fourth and final key principle essential to the chaplain's autotheographical ministry with students was highlighted in Chapter 5 where I reflected on my story within the larger context of the church's story. In this way, I wanted to show the importance of helping students to examine and identify their own context of ultimacy. Importantly then, students need to be allowed to express doubts or reservations about this context, to draw upon their unique traditions in that context, and to critique the notions of ultimacy in the dominant culture. At the very least, students should be given guidance in articulating how they see their personal stories connecting with the larger stories of their tradition with which they associate their own meaning or purpose in human existence.

Having intentionally developed and carried out a process of autobiographical sharing, the Mud Flower Collective came to see their shared experiences together in a much larger context:

One of the few things we are confident in speaking of as a universal is the need common to us all to be the subjects of our own lives. . . . Community grows in our acting together on behalf of our common need to be taken seriously as the subjects of our own lives, to realize ourselves and be

realized by others as valuable persons, seekers of life for ourselves and others.²³

It is important to note here that this dimension of human sharing of personal stories taps into the dimension of the religious or spiritual in the experiences of every human being.

Somewhere, hidden in such stories, there is a "variety of religious experiences" (James), or "dimensions of ultimacy" (Gilkey), or "rumors of angels" (Berger). And that's why we tell stories, our stories: to see if Someone's there, to see if Someone cares. . . . Our contention . . . is that people, in telling their stories, are telling religious tales. They are not necessarily aware of this; they certainly do not use any kind of religious vocabulary or phrasing, but religious tales they do tell. How can we tell? Because so often they tell stories, however unconsciously, that deal with life's meaning, life's fundamentals, life's mysteries . . . posing ultimate questions in their storytelling. . . . What is there? Who is there? What is life all about anyway?²⁴

By the time student groups have reached this point, they will be ready to begin sharing at a more immediate level around a broader range of topics. They could view films, attend plays, visit sites of religious observances, observe art, or discuss carefully selected current events, all with a view to exploring how such experiences are seen within each of the individual perspectives present in the group. In turn, group members would be ready, and (it would be hoped) able, to understand those perspectives more concretely through reflection and discussion.

²³ Mud Flower Collective, 99-100.

²⁴ Bausch, 171-72.

What this process holds out as a real and vital possibility is the prospect of creating a new autotheographical community within the campus as a whole, a community composed of persons from across lines of perceived differences in an effort not to create cultural sameness or to advance one cultural hegemony over another. These kinds of communities could lay the groundwork for broadening and deepening community life within the campus, in spite of and because of its diversity. Significantly then, following the key principles of beginning with story, identifying a context of meaning, connecting to the community, and reflecting upon the story, can move students from their yet unexpressed stories within the larger campus community toward expressing their stories as *our community story* in the context of an autotheographical community.

CHAPTER 7

Reaffirming Chaplains in the Context of Today's
Campus World: Conceptualizing My Story
as a Chaplain's Story

One of my daughter's favorite stories for bedtime reading as a young child featured a blue, furry muppet from television's Sesame Street, U.S.A., by the name of Grover. In the story, Grover humorously entices the young reader to move from page to page by urging just the opposite--namely, that upon the conclusion of reading each succeeding page, the child is admonished not to turn another page. The "not-turning" rationale, urged over and over by Grover, is that the child should beware the monster at the end of the book. He urges, pleads, and cajoles--all to no avail--as the avid, young reader turns and devours page after page of mystery, intrigue, and excitement leading to the climax of the book. Growing fear on Grover's part only begets new courage and resolve on the part of the reader. At long last, both reader and Grover breathe a sigh of relief and reveal their delight when, on the very last page, the monster at the end of the book turns out to be none other than good-old, loveable Grover himself.

I must acknowledge that this vividly, gripping children's story aptly reflects the ambivalence I felt about arriving at the end of this dissertation. While being excited and challenged by my topic, I feared that I might

discover something at the end of this journey with which I was not prepared to cope. What if I got to the end of this academic pursuit and had fewer answers to my questions than expected or had added more questions to my agenda than I had in the beginning? What if, in further developing my method for personal and theological reflection around autobiography, I found that it did not live up to my expectations or confirm my strong belief in it? What if I returned to the campus having advanced my theological skills, while at the same time having discerned I was still lacking in other skills needed for meeting specific challenges related to current issues on the campus? What if I came to the end of my graduate work and unfortunately substantiated a popular belief among some of my collegial colleagues that the challenges facing all of us on the college campus in the next few years (that will take us into the twenty-first century) are, in fact, insurmountable? Or worse yet, what if my method and analysis confirmed that, in actuality, college student ministry could just as easily be carried out on the campus by other college professionals, thereby, further marginalizing the chaplain's role (and that of other ministers to students on the campus) even more than it already is today?

These questions have lurked about in the shadows of my mind ever since I returned to graduate school. However, as I have worked my way through to this final chapter, I am

delighted to report that the monster, whom I had dreaded meeting at the end of this storied academic adventure, has turned out to be much more friendly and much less ferocious than I had feared. In fact, I have learned by experience and observation that I am not alone in my search for answers to fearful, difficult, and complex questions that have been brought on by a rapidly changing world. One need only read the headlines of the newspaper, listen to music on the radio, view the evening news on television, travel from one's home or community environment to another neighborhood or city, attend a workshop, shop in a large department store, watch a parade or sports event, or participate in a religious service of worship, to confirm that change has come to our nation (and to our world), and change is here to stay. Even as I travelled to various campuses for job interviews this semester, much of my time spent with interviewers was absorbed by their anxiety-ridden desires to find someone who could give them easy answers and quick solutions for dealing with ever-growing problems and conflicts stemming from diversity issues that had pervaded their campuses during the past year.

As I look to my future as a chaplain, as well as learn from my past, I nevertheless remain confident that the use of autobiography on the college campus today has the power to assist us as we live with, reflect on, and make difficult changes in our lives and in our world. While the method for

using autobiography at which I have arrived is admittedly different from other methods with which most chaplains are already familiar, and while it is marked by traces of my own uncertainty and fear, it possesses the redeeming value of being both worthy and do-able. And, in the final analysis, according to Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, the adequacy of my method "must be judged by how it functions toward liberation in any particular context."¹

As has already been exemplified and graphically illustrated, the theology of ministry I have proposed here is clearly tied to my personal story which is deeply interwoven and connected to the emerging story of the autotheographical community--a community which is in-the-making. Additionally, ministry on a multi-diverse campus demands that the chaplain have a vision of what it means to be an autotheographical community and what it takes to bring it into reality. Therefore, I offer a case study to serve as a concrete, reflective illustration (or story) that will exemplify some of the dynamics that came into play on a campus that was, and still is, committed to taking action on multicultural and multiethnic problems.

A Case Study

The day of April 29, 1992, and the 48 hours that followed, were prophetic events in the history of our nation. The uprising that took place in Los Angeles (L.A.)

¹ Moore, 195.

at that time caused each of us to look inward at ourselves and to look outward at who we had become--a nation filled with marginalized, oppressed, and discarded people. When the verdict of "not guilty" was announced in the trial of four police officers accused of the inhumane, brutal beating of Rodney King in L.A., many of the oppressed people in the city made their voices heard around the world through their acts of violence and destruction. In the midst of this time of burning, looting, and killing, and in the days of aftermath following, our multicultural, faith community at the School of Theology at Claremont (STC) gathered together for daily worship for a week. We wanted desperately to explore and experiment with constructive ways to vent our agonizing, sometimes explosive and conflictual, feelings of pain, anger, bewilderment, fear, loneliness, and frustration. Through our daily worship and in our search for answers, we were able to release some of our fears and our anger, to share some of our unedited questions and doubts, and to allow for times of silence when needed.

Sometimes we tiptoed through parts of our worship time together because we were afraid that something we said or did might unearth feelings that we had thus far been able to contain, and in an emotional, stressful, tense moment we didn't want to find ourselves out of control. At the same time, we wanted and needed God to lead us through this agonizing wilderness of pain and give us hope that the

future could be different from what it had been in the past. But we weren't sure how to make it happen. Also through worship we discovered our need to claim openly our specific cultural and ethnic identities with integrity and conviction in a safe, trusting environment; that was needed before we could work on our group identity as an STC community. Unfortunately, within a short period of time, the school year drew to a halt, and many of us left for the summer with unresolved problems and issues hanging in the balance.

When we returned for the fall semester, the STC faculty reminded the community, during our first worship service, that they had adopted a theme for the year at a previous May faculty meeting: "Racism, Rage, and Reconciliation." Also, at the beginning of the fall term, I was selected by the Academic Dean as one of four students to serve as a multiculturally-based team of Co-Worship Coordinators for our 1992-93 weekly worship services on the campus.

In light of the faculty's choice of a praxis-based theme for the year, and in light of our commitment to make worship on campus relevant to the community, we (the Co-Worship Coordinators) planned a campuswide worship service to be held in November around the theme of "Voices of the Unheard." Our purpose was threefold: (1) to celebrate our cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity as a Christian community--thus, continuing the dialogue begun last spring; (2) to affirm our unity through our solidarity with various

unheard voices in the world; and (3) to worship more responsibly and wholistically with all of our bodily senses.

Though our intentions were good and honorable, we naively stumbled onto dangerous ground during the worship service. After nearly two hours of planned and spontaneous sharing of stories, deep wounds were opened and various student groups expressed their pain as minorities.² Our service concluded with feelings of divisiveness and tension in the community. Even though our sharing had taken place in the context of worship and communion, the threads of the fabric of our community began to unravel again, just as they had earlier in the preceding spring.

Following the service, for the rest of the week, and for the next few weeks before winter break, the STC community agonizingly continued to reflect on the problems with which we were being confronted. Students appeared at the offices of faculty members and administrative staff for individual counseling. Faculty and student committees, campus organizations, and a special task force searched for ways to respond to the mess we were in. Friends spontaneously gathered together for long conversations about the issues at hand. Individual students wrote letters to the editor of the student newspaper in efforts to make their

² Stories of pain and oppression were shared by students representing a variety of campus organizations: African, African-American, Korean, Korean-American, gays and lesbians, Asian-Pacific American, Latin American, Anglo-American, and women from the Women's Concerns Task Force.

feelings public and, perhaps, to encourage community action. Some classes opted out of scheduled class time in order to discuss their reactions to the service and reflect on the ongoing needs of the community.

This dialogue continued throughout the spring semester. Our campus community-in-the-making continued to reflect personally and theologically on a variety of questions, such as: Why did these events happen?; Who is responsible?; and What should be done? Greater attention was given to sharing our ethnic, cultural, and spiritual stories through movies that were seen and discussed; dances, stories, rituals, and songs that were shared from different cultures; art exhibits related to ethnicity, culture, and the L.A. uprising; intercultural and crosscultural potluck meals; informal conversations over coffee and lunch; cultural and multicultural experiences of corporate worship; and rituals created to celebrate special occasions. At the beginning of the spring semester, the Co-Worship Coordinators agreed that, as we planned worship for the remainder of the year, we would work at accepting the things we could not change, having the courage to change the things we could, and, by the grace of God, hoping for the wisdom to know the difference.³

³ See "Elusive Origins of the Serenity Prayer," Box 459: News and Notes from the General Services Office of A.A., August-September 1992, 1-2. This is an adaptation of the Serenity Prayer which is known worldwide. Despite years of research, its exact origin and author have eluded researchers. In fact, every time a research appears "to uncover the definitive source, another one crops up to

As a community-in-the-making, we worked at forming fewer assumptions and attempted to see life from the vantage point of our sisters and brothers in the community. We struggled to communicate in the midst of our disagreements, conflicts, and mistrust. We allowed time for our individual stories to unfold, to be told, and to be heard. Gradually, through the remainder of the academic year, some of our

refute the former's claim, at the same time that it raises new, intriguing facts." However, the claim of authorship by theologian Rheinhold Niebuhr has gone undisputed. He recounted to research interviewers on several occasions that he wrote the prayer as a tag line to a sermon on practical Christianity. However, Niebuhr also admitted, with a touch of doubt in his claim, that "it may have been spooking around for years, even centuries, but I don't think so. I honestly do believe that I wrote it myself." When Mrs. Niebuhr was interviewed, she stated that she believes the prayer is authentically her husband's because she had seen the piece of paper on which he had written it. Nonetheless, the search for pinpointing the origin of the prayer goes on.

Some of the alleged sources to which the prayer is attributed are an eighteenth-century pietist, an anonymous poet, early Greeks, an American Naval officer, ancient Sanskrit texts, St. Augustine, Aristotle, Spinoza, St. Thomas Aquinas, and a north German university professor. In many of the accounts of the prayer's text found by researchers, what is common among them is the "prayer's themes of acceptance, courage to change what can be changed, and the free letting go of what is out of one's ability to change."

Having seen the prayer originally as a caption in a New York Herald Tribune obituary, early in 1942 Bill W. brought the beauty, wisdom, simplicity, and power of its message to the attention of A.A. members in A.A. Comes of Age. It read: "God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference." Within a short period of time, the prayer became very popular, was put into general use by A.A. and distributed to the troops in World War II by the U.S.O., and printed by the World Council of Churches, with permission of Niebuhr. It has continued to remain deeply imbedded in the heart and soul of A.A. thinking worldwide.

individual and group stories began to take on meaning as they connected with other stories in the community.

Toward the end of the semester, the Co-Worship Coordinators, in concert with the President and the Academic Dean, made plans for a campuswide service to commemorate the first anniversary of the L.A. uprising. Our theme was "The Voices and Stories of Community: Where We Are Now at STC." Unlike the multicultural worship service earlier in November, this service incarnated a reality of hope, healing, and reconciliation because as a community we had lived through some of our pain and anger in open and honest ways. We had claimed and affirmed our particular and corporate identities within the context of a common faith and spirituality. More importantly and significantly, it was in the context of worship together that some of the voices and stories of our community were heard for the first time. And, it was in the context of worship that we began to make the transition from being a storied community-in-the-making to forming ourselves into an autotheographical community. (Of course, this does not mean that all problems or barriers of communication were solved, but steps were made toward building a different community from what we had been in the past.)

This case study makes evident the reality that being a community-in-the-making means that *real* community does not just happen on its own, though it always has the potential

for *becoming* community. It also means that, when a community becomes autotheographical, work is needed to keep it that way. Therefore, any community is constantly *in-the-making* but can look forward to those moments in time when it is able to incarnate more truly its identity as an autotheographical community. What better way to image God for each other on this planet than through our autotheographical stories?

I conclude this chapter with a vision of three distinct but interrelated roles of the college chaplain as she or he serves in the role of autotheographer, giving specific attention to the various, interrelated functions of that role. Those functions are: the chaplain as storyteller, the chaplain as storyshaper, and the chaplain as storyweaver.

The Chaplain as Storyteller

The role of the chaplain as teller of her or his own story is important in forming an autotheographical community. The chaplain who has moved through the crucible of autobiographical storytelling and reflection will, therefore, be better prepared to facilitate a meaningful and constructive autotheographical experience for students.

At the outset there are three ideal prerequisite credentials for chaplains who would facilitate the formation of an autotheographically diverse community. The first has to do specifically with a requirement to have had past

autobiographical experience in a multicultural and multi-religious context. However, this does not discount those chaplains who have not participated in and learned from other religiously or culturally diverse contexts, reflected on those experiences in a meaningful way, or taken constructive action on those experiences. Furthermore, lest my suggestion of this important credential be misconstrued, let me hasten to clarify that it is supported with valid reasons which are philosophical, pastoral, professional, and ecological.

Philosophically, chaplains do not fully know what they are asking of students when they ask him or her to be autobiographical unless chaplains themselves have been self-narrators. Chaplains who have reflected on their own experiences can render an element of knowledge, insight, and understanding of themselves and of others which can come about in no other way. When they have taken risks and undertaken the discipline and sorting of ambiguities associated with telling their own stories, they will be better equipped to facilitate the process of others' forming and telling their personal stories. For example, if I had not been an active participant in the worship services or other campuswide events and activities mentioned above in the case study, I would not know what I now know about building relationships and forming community in a multicultural campus setting.

From a pastoral perspective, chaplains who have had past autobiographical experience will know how to gently and carefully facilitate the process of students telling their stories, allowing for the particular threshold of each student to dictate the amount of self-disclosure to be risked. Had we realized this as we structured our fall worship service (examined somewhat in the case study), we more than likely would have been able to prevent some of the problems we faced.

Additionally, from a professional perspective, there is another important issue that must be considered by the chaplain when asking students to be autobiographical in a self-disclosive way. Sometimes, under the best of circumstances and when adequate precautions are taken, a student's memories, that have been safely buried for a period of time, become unearthed. Hopefully when this happens, new insights will arise and become catalysts for healing and personal growth. Yet, there is also the potential that the return of these memories will reveal a deeper pathology at work, and perhaps one that is greater than chaplains are equipped to care for. If the latter is what happens, then any chaplain's best professional decision might be to refer the student to appropriate professional care, while remaining sensitive and affirming of the student in the process. Or, the chaplain's best decision might be one that is community-oriented and other-directed as she or

he explores and examines ways to empower the community itself to deal with its specific problems.

From an ecological perspective, chaplains whose autobiographical experience authenticates that they are an important part of the circle of life, will, thereby, be more respectful of the earth and all of its inhabitants.

According to Dhyani Ywahoo,

All being is an aspect of yourself. So to listen to the elements of nature is to listen to the voice of yourself. . . . These are your relatives. . . . Let us all speak the best of one another and perceive the best in everything.⁴

Ywahoo, along with many of her Native American sisters and brothers, and other environmentalists, emphatically remind us how, in everything we say and do, we must always consider "how our present actions [as chaplains and students] will affect the world, unto seven generations."⁵

Chaplains need not only possess the prerequisite credential of past autobiographical experience but they would be more effective ministers if they were bearers of a second and third credential as well. Since the two are so closely connected, they will be discussed together. These credentials have to do with acceptance of the Divine mystery and the use of the chaplain's imagination. One's story

⁴ Dhyani Ywahoo, "Renewing the Sacred Hoop," in Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality, eds. Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ (San Francisco: Harper/Collins, 1989), 275.

⁵ Ywahoo, 275.

cannot be shaped, reflected upon, or critiqued without first having been nurtured by one's imagination, or without having learned from experience that there are some things in life that cannot be grasped, understood, explained, or described. This is the mystery of life and, more specifically, the mystery of the Divine.

Acceptance of mystery is as important as, if not more important than, imagination. First, mystery can affirm and confirm one's belief that the Divine is greater than oneself and all that one can know, understand, or touch; the Divine cannot be fully divine unless the Divine is also mystery. Second, mystery can cultivate, encourage, and stimulate one's imagination. It has a way of shaping itself in the depths of a person's subconscious mind until, sooner or later, when it surfaces, it has miraculously been transformed into an idea, an insight, a vision, a dialogue, or a critique. Third, when students accept, through reason, the reality of mystery as a given in their lives, they can more freely begin to focus on the use of their imagination. Imagination can point students beyond what they "can actually think about because it does not need definition [and there is] a built-in limitation to intellect."⁶ Thus, imagination can take students deeper into the mystery of the Divine.

⁶ Jeffrey D. Imbach, The Recovery of Love: Christian Mysticism and the Addictive Society (New York: Crossroad Publs., 1992), 143.

To be more specific, according to Sharon Parks, our imagination can help students make choices, notice certain details, and pass over others. It can act first as a kind of filter and then as a kind of lens where the mind composes its world.⁷ Hence, students' imaginations possess great power because everything they sense or perceive is created by it.

As the chaplain's world is imaginatively created by autobiography, she or he, as a minister, must find ways to take students deeper into the mystery of the Divine and to incarnate the Divine imagination. In this way the chaplain will be able to serve as an interpreter and namer of that which is not readily or immediately visible to the students. Importantly then, the chaplain's own inner well of imagination should serve as a cup of cold water in the dry desert of students' imaginations, helping them to form visions, fire passions, and dream dreams that can work in concert with the Divine to bring healing and transformation to theirs' and others' lives, as well as to the planet.⁸ But we must not forget that those dreams that are dreamed are dreamed from within certain contexts and within certain cultural boundaries that are not always visible, understood,

⁷ Sharon Parks, The Critical Years: Young Adults and the Search for Meaning, Faith, and Commitment (San Francisco: Harper/Collins, 1991), 176.

⁸ Parks, see especially pp. 131-32.

or found within another person's frame of reference or experience.

It is crucial, therefore, that chaplains who venture to minister within an autotheographical community possess the prerequisite credentials of past autobiographical experience, creative imagination, and appreciation for the Divine mystery. These credentials are foundational and significant in the ministry of chaplains as they exemplify and incarnate what it means to be an autotheographical storyteller in a storied community-in-the-making.

The Chaplain as Storyshaper

While telling one's own story can be a powerful experience, the shaping and nurturing of others' stories can be even more powerful--as seen in the earlier case study. In the role of storyshaper, chaplains must sensitively create an environment where students can perceive the importance of their own individual stories since many of them come to the autotheographical community bereft of experience in accessing their own reservoir of symbols or metaphors through which they can express their personal stories. Consequently, chaplains can play a significant mentoring role by helping students to express and expand their imaginative capacities to dream dreams, derive and discover meaning from everyday experiences, and give birth to new images and insights about themselves. Also as storyshapers, chaplains should help students recognize that

life depends on everyone working together, "even as we are [all] absolutely dependent."⁹

In our struggles to maintain our self- and group-identities on STC's multicultural campus this last year, the efforts to shape and nurture each other's stories helped us move past the impasse of our divisiveness and to affirm and celebrate our differences. It was in the context of our everyday, ordinary experiences, rituals, and traditions--from our past and our present--that we worked as a community-in-the-making.

On the college campus, as the community makes stories together, the identities of students must be nourished in a non-judgmental atmosphere. Each story must be listened to and understood by another in an atmosphere where students are free to define themselves according to whom they think they are rather than according to whom others think they are or expect them to be.¹⁰ When true listening takes place,

we find ourselves more willing to become vulnerable, to take the risk of entering the pain of others. We open our lives to them in a genuine willingness to be known. . . . We feel their hearts bleeding into ours, we catch their tears. We relieve their pain as much as we are able, and by relieving theirs, we relieve God's [the Divine's].¹¹

⁹ Parks, 199.

¹⁰ O'Neill, 90.

¹¹ Kidd, "Birthing Compassion," 28-29.

This is surely how compassion becomes a praxis rooted in the stories that are shaped and nurtured in the community. On the STC campus, the longer we spent in getting to know one another as individuals and hear each other's stories, the easier it was to feel compassion toward and toward others in the L.A. community who had become victims of the civil unrest. Our knowledge of each other helped us better understand the reasons for the looting and the killing and other responses of violence.

As storyshapers on a multicultural campus, chaplains need to pay close attention to the issue of identity, especially as we come closer to the year 2000. When we reach that marker in our nation's history, according to demographic projections made in 1989, it was reported that Blacks and Hispanics will become the majority in approximately one third of our nation's 50 largest cities, with Blacks alone becoming the major racial group in at least nine of the cities.¹² Based on these statistics, educator Henry Giroux reports that people of color are more and more redrawing the cultural demographic boundaries of our nation. At the same time, emphasizes Giroux, since the "boundaries of power appear to be solidifying in favor of

¹² Statistics quoted from editorial, "The Biggest Secret of Race Relations: The New White Minority," Ebony, April 1989, 84, and John B. Kellog, "Forces of Change," Phi Delta Kappan, November 1988, 199-204; in Henry A. Giroux, Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education (New York: Routledge, 1992), 111.

rich, white, middle, and upper classes, [t]he consequences of this solidification will have a dramatic effect on race relations in the next decade."¹³ These various identities--cultural, racial, national, and class--will greatly impact the people of our nation as well as those on our college campuses.

In addition, chaplains must also remain alert to collective institutional actions taken by administration, faculty, and staff who want to affirm the diversity of students along with their particular identities.¹⁴ The chaplain, therefore, must remain alert and aware of the impact of these issues on students as she or he incarnates the role of autotheographer and functions as a storyteller and a storyshaper.

Howard Thurman, a former college chaplain, was a storyshaper. He and his wife Sue created shared experiences to help cross barriers among the people in their congregation. In 1943, Thurman was invited to serve as a co-pastor of a new Protestant church that was being formed

¹³ Giroux, 111. See especially his excellent chapter, "Beyond the Politics of Pluralism," 111-41.

¹⁴ See earlier discussion on diversity in Chapter 1. Also, see especially stories written by several women regarding their own questions of identity, origin, displacement, and connectedness in Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ, eds., Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality (San Francisco: Harper/Collins, 1989), 344-56; Hertha Dawn Wong, Sending My Heart Back Across the Years: Tradition and Innovation in Native American Autobiography (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), v-vi; and Mud Flower Collective, God's Fierce Whimsy.

in San Francisco. The creators of the church wanted it to reflect their community and to transcend racial, social, and cultural distinctions.¹⁵ When he and Sue began to imagine what this new church might look like as a religious fellowship of relational people, they drew from the watering hole of their past experiences and came up with a similar conviction or image. Their conviction was that

meaningful and creative experiences between peoples can be more compelling than all the ideas, concepts, faiths, fears, ideologies, and prejudices that divide them; and [they had] absolute faith that if such experiences can be multiplied and sustained over a time interval of sufficient duration any barrier that separates one person from another can be undermined and eliminated.¹⁶

From the beginning days of this new church, many of their ideas were fresh, experimental, and untried. And, contrary to those who would think otherwise, their ministry was successful and effective.

With this same kind of spirit and conviction, chaplains too can be successful and effective in helping students to transcend self-identity barriers and find meaning in their own personal stories, especially if the self-reflection and sharing takes place over a time interval of sufficient duration. As a storyshaper, I long for the opportunity to minister to students in this way and am grateful to the Thurmans for having the courage to risk implementing and

¹⁵ Thurman, 142.

¹⁶ Thurman, 148.

imagining a creative, fellowshiping community of Christian people that is based on relationships and experiences that can cross barrier lines.

The Chaplain as Storyweaver

When chaplains begin to weave together the multilayered threads of students' autobiographies with theology and with the stories of others in the community, chaplains become autotheographical storyweavers. Accordingly, chaplains must be both courageous and cautious as they attempt to interweave the complex threads of gender and conflict with those of religion, culture, race, and class. This task of storyweaving will indeed be a challenge for even the wisest of chaplains. Yet, the task can become a blessing because storyweaving on the campus can lead to an enlightened recognition of "that which not only transcends us (*is beyond* us) but also permeates our very existence (*exists within and among* us)."¹⁷ This recognition, then, can also move the storywoven community even closer to imagine the mystery of what it means to be made in the Divine image.

In the context of moving from an emerging community-in-the-making to an autotheographical community, chaplains who become storyweavers can empower students, through their own storymaking and storytelling, to become co-storyweavers with them. In this way, students can be expected to take

¹⁷ Parks, 19.

ownership¹⁸ of their stories and those of the community, consequently, taking responsibility for moving themselves from potentiality (for community) to actuality (of community).

Storyweaving, as an important ministry of the chaplain, can be a place of meaning-making, community-building, and barrier-crossing for students. When their hearts are touched and engaged by the woven stories of the community-in-the-making, they will be able to "connect with other persons and events across time, . . . root [themselves] deeply in the culture and religion of their own people, and cross boundaries into the stories of other peoples and the earth."¹⁹ At this juncture in the community's story, divinity can break out from within the community,²⁰ lives can get transformed, and autotheographical community can be born.

When this happens, students will take time to mourn and cry with those whose stories have been unheard, lost,

¹⁸ William J. Bausch writes: "To own one's story means to accept the whole of it, the whole of our lives, . . . to give ourselves the total acceptance that God gives us." In Storytelling: Imagination and Faith, 205.

¹⁹ Moore, 131.

²⁰ Kidd, in "Birthing Compassion," relates that Meister Eckhart, "a fourteenth-century mystic and theologian, used imagery that highlighted the truth that divine life, like human life, is implanted internally and comes about. . . . as God is born more deeply in the soul," 28. See also Matthew Fox, Meditations with Meister Eckhart (Santa Fe: Bear and Co., 1983).

forgotten, or left out. They will be motivated to celebrate with those whose stories have helped them to come to terms with who they are; led them to see life as a gift; empowered them to speak the truth when it must be spoken; inspired them to reform that which needs reforming; shown them what it means to be faithful and to be forgiven; taught them how to be praxis-oriented in their search for justice and harmony in an oppressed world; and given them a community of friends who hospitably offer them a place to belong, where everybody knows their name, and where what happens to them makes a difference to someone else.

Put another way, as students become subjects of their own destiny, through the ongoing theological weaving of their stories with others' stories, they will become sisters and brothers whose heartbeats will become connected with other heartbeats in the world and will "pulsate in tune together with God's heartbeats in creation."²¹

Significantly, when the chaplain takes the stories of the community-in-the-making and weaves them into an autotheographical community story, power will be shared, right relationships will be given attention, and stories from the past and the present will give the community a vision of the future. This is vitally important because without a storied vision of community, the stories of the

²¹ Song, Theology from the Womb of Asia, xii.

people will perish, and without a storied vision of self-in-community, an individual's identity will perish.²²

Remember the story.

²² A paraphrased adaptation from Prov. 29:18: "Without a vision of community, the people will perish."

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